

LIFE GROUP FIELD GUIDE

BIRTH OF A NATION

THE STORY OF ACTS: TAG, YOU'RE IT.

WEEK TWENTY-FIVE

A NEW CONVERSATION



BIRTH OF A NATION

THE STORY OF ACTS: TAG, YOU'RE IT.

👉 THE STORY: ACTS 15:1-35 3

👉 BIG IDEA 5

👉 INSIDE/OUTSIDE 5

👉 GRACE DISPUTED 6

👉 ILLUSTRATING THE TEXT 6

👉 GRACE DEFENDED 7

👉 GRACE DISPLAYED 9

👉 GRACE DELIVERED AND DESCRIBED 9

👉 REFLECT AND DISCUSS 10

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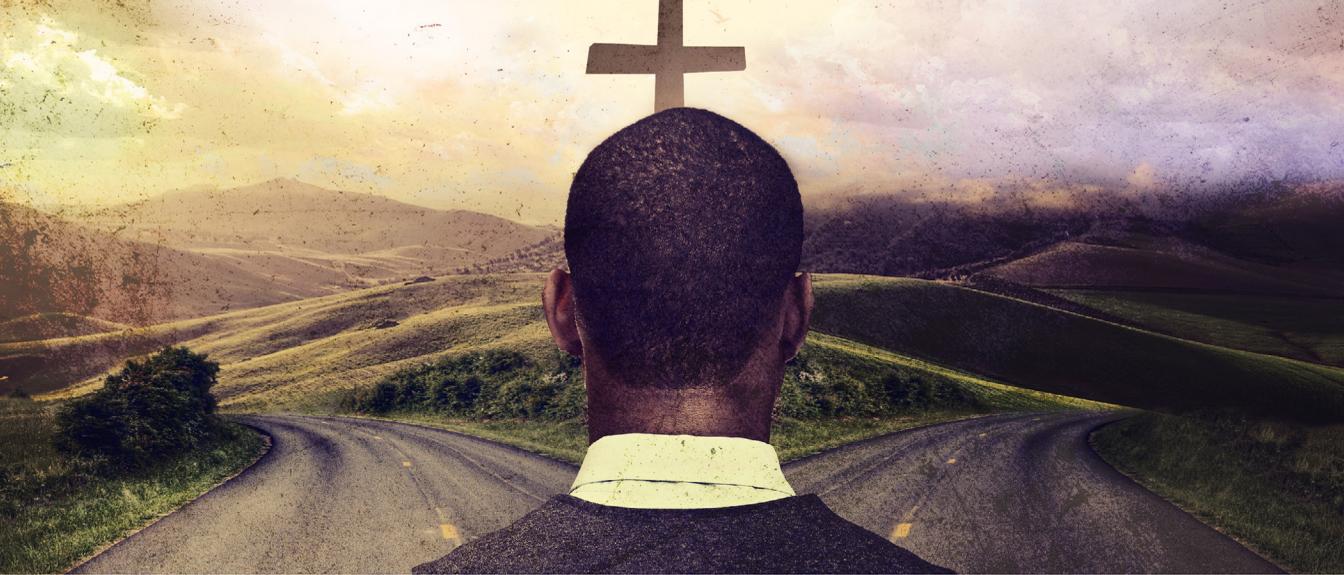
TAG, YOU'RE IT!

KEY VERSE

ACTS 14:21-22

21 WHEN THEY HAD PREACHED THE GOSPEL TO THAT CITY AND HAD MADE MANY DISCIPLES, THEY RETURNED TO LYSTRA AND TO ICONIUM AND TO ANTIOCH, 22 STRENGTHENING THE SOULS OF THE DISCIPLES, ENCOURAGING THEM TO CONTINUE IN THE FAITH, AND SAYING THAT THROUGH MANY TRIBULATIONS WE MUST ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD.





THE STORY: ACTS 15:1-35 [ESV]

1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." **2** And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. **3** So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. **4** When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. **5** But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses." **6** The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. **7** And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. **8** And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, **9** and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. **10** Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? **11** But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." **12** And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among

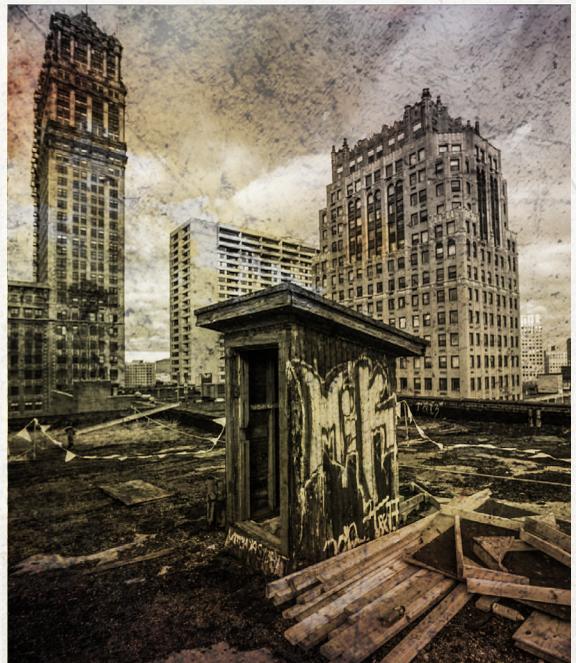
the Gentiles. **13** After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. **14** Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. **15** And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, **16** "After this I will return, 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.' **19** Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, **20** but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. **21** For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues." **22** Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, **23** with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. **24** Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, **25** it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, **26** men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. **27** We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. **28** For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: **29** that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." **30** So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. **31** And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. **32** And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. **33** And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. **34-35** But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

AT THE INTERSECTION OF LAW OF GRACE, LIES A NEW COVENANT COMMUNITY.

Inside/Outside

Detroit is very much an insider city. After hearing that someone is “from” Detroit, the next question is usually “from where in Detroit?” From Detroit proper, or Metro Detroit? Sometimes it’s a subtle bit of scrutiny, other times, not so much. But the idea is simply that Detroit is a place that while it’s becoming more diverse and even coveted among outsiders, there is a residue of “are you in or are you out?” While of course outsiders are welcome. They often find themselves assimilating to the city culture here. But on the other side of the learning and engaging, lies a deeply rooted connection with some of the greatest and most resilient people in the world. The truth is found between the extremes of both insider and outsider. Which is where we initiate a new conversation. This requires us to leave our perspective corners and come together to contend for unity around the essentials, liberty around the non-essentials, and in all things charity. This is what our passage brings us into. The contention about the gentiles (outsiders) needing to adhere to the law of Moses and circumcision in order to become like the Jew (insiders) had major implications of the growing gospel movement. This was no small matter, and the result of this theological debate would permeate through culture and history. There are moments where we must cast off our inside/outside distinctions that we might pick up and esteem our identity in Christ Jesus above all. And if our faith drifts into any other person, place, thing, or epitaph, we must rediscover the only one truly worthy; Jesus.

For this reason, the apostles and leaders of the church had to make a great stand in Jerusalem. They had to contend for the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus. Verse 11 captures the major affirmation of the chapter: “We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are.” Christians today need to be ready to “contend for the faith” as well (Jude 3). If we lose the gospel, we lose everything that matters (1 Cor 15:3-4). We should, of course, contend with civility, gentleness, and respect, but we must contend. This chapter also shows us the need for extending Christian charity in maintaining unity within the body.¹ When matters don’t involve the



¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-centered exposition (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017).

essentials of the faith, Christians should be flexible. They should be sensitive to others' consciences and, in love, avoid offending the weaker brother or sister by arguing nonessentials. Acts 15 sits between the first and second missionary journeys of Paul. One can only imagine what would have happened if this conference had not ended in wholehearted agreement over the gospel. This issue had to be settled for the gospel to continue to spread to the Gentile world. Fortunately, everyone was unified in spirit and truth, and the rest of Acts shows Paul proclaiming the gospel of grace with passion.

Grace Disputed

God's opening "the door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27) sparked serious theological controversy. Not everyone rejoiced over the Gentile mission gaining great momentum. Some Jewish believers didn't like the idea that the Gentiles were retaining their own identity as they joined the community of faith. In other words, they thought a Gentile needed to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. Luke wrote of their resulting insistence on the Gentiles adhering to the law of Moses, especially to circumcision, before becoming Christians (vv. 1-5). Many Gentiles existed in the church in Antioch, but there's no indication Paul said anything about them becoming proselytes to Judaism before becoming Christians. This stance posed a serious problem to some conservative Jewish Christians, who adamantly made circumcision a condition for salvation (v. 1). These men could have been sent by James, but they ended up misrepresenting him in their insistence on circumcision. It's also possible they were "false brothers [who] had infiltrated" the church (Gal 2:4). In all fairness to the Jewish critics, they raised a natural question.¹ The

¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-centered exposition (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017).

²Garland, David E., Mark L. Strauss, John H. Walton, Kevin Harney, Sherry Harney, and Adam T. Barr. 2017. "Acts. Teach The Text Commentary Series." Grand Rapids, MI.

ILLUSTRATING THE TEXT

The church must guard against any teaching that asserts that something more than faith is required.

Government: In order to vote in an election, you don't need money, status, fame, or power—you only need to be a registered voter. Prior to 1964, some local governments and even states forced people to pay a "poll tax." In other words, one could not get into the voting station without bringing some kind of payment. This was eventually outlawed by the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, which says, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote in any primary or other election . . . shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State by reason of failure to pay any poll tax or other tax." Christians come to God with faith alone—nothing else. Nothing else can bring us to God—not money, status, fame, or power. Any other presumed conditions for acceptance have been "outlawed" and rejected by God. All believers enter God's kingdom in the same way and on the same basis: by grace through faith in Christ.

The church today may not identify with carved idols, but we still must identify and throw away idolatry.

Object Lesson: The idea of bowing down to a carved statue may seem ridiculous to the modern person. Idols are not limited to graven images, but to any person, possession, purpose, or pursuit that takes priority and precedence over God. Take out a credit card and bow down to it. Take out a laptop or smart phone and bow down to it. Take out a sports jersey or toy car and bow down to it. The picture may seem silly and absurd, but we can challenge, "How many of us live our lives idolizing these very things? How many of us give more of ourselves—our minds, our resources, our time, our attention spans, and our hearts—to these items than to God?"²

first Christians were Jewish; Jesus was Jewish; the old-covenant people were Jewish. Christianity was a messianic movement that was foretold in the Old Testament. And since Jews had always demanded that Gentile converts be circumcised and adhere to the rituals of the Torah in order to be accepted into the community, it was probably difficult for them to understand the sudden change. They failed to realize that with the incarnation of Christ, everything had changed! Because the issue was so serious—potentially leading to the formation of two separate churches, one Gentile and one Jewish—a conference was held to deal with the matter. The church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas and some others to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders. As they traveled some 250 miles to Jerusalem, they visited the congregations in Phoenicia and Samaria. The believers in these places didn't have the same concerns as the Jewish critics, so they rejoiced with Paul and Barnabas. When the pair arrived in Jerusalem, the mother church gladly welcomed the delegates, and they also rejoiced over the testimonies of God's grace at work among the Gentiles. Not everyone welcomed them warmly, however (v. 5). Some from the Pharisee party argued that the Gentiles must not only be circumcised but also keep the Mosaic law. Circumcision, in fact, represented a commitment to keep the whole Mosaic law, including its ritual aspects. The Pharisees were prepared to debate their objection to a grace/faith-based, circumcision-free gospel. Unfortunately, even today we see people disputing the idea that salvation is by grace alone. Many adhere, sometimes without even realizing it, to a Jesus-plus-something-else gospel: Jesus plus baptism, Jesus plus church attendance, Jesus plus quiet times, Jesus plus your christian to-do list. But if we add anything to the gospel, we lose the gospel. Gospel math works like this: Jesus plus nothing equals everything. The work of Jesus Christ is totally sufficient. This gospel of the saving exclusivity of Jesus by the grace of Jesus will always be disputed because the default mode of the human heart is works-based righteousness, not faith-based righteousness. But we can't earn righteousness; we simply receive it by faith alone. So rejoice in the grace of God! You have been saved by sheer grace (Eph 2:8-9), not by doing works of the law but through placing faith in Jesus (Gal 2:16-17).¹ Salvation by grace alone distinguishes Christianity from every other world religion. Religion is built on human performance, but no one has ever been saved by human performance or religious observance. The Lord has always desired our faith. The gospel, therefore, is not "do this to earn God's favor"; it is, "Jesus paid it all, so trust in him." In relying on this grace, we live our lives to the glory of God.

Grace Defended

The apostles and elders gathered to discuss this crucial matter. The solution didn't come through a new word of revelation from a prophet but through careful reasoning based on Scripture's teaching. Three speeches that defend the gospel of grace are recorded. First, Peter reported his experience in his evangelization of the Gentiles. Next, Paul and Barnabas reported how God used them to reach the Gentiles. Then, James interpreted their experiences in light of the Scriptures. Peter steps up first (big surprise!). He alludes to the events with Cornelius, which took place about ten years before the Jerusalem Council. Peter says his preaching to the Gentiles wasn't his idea but part of God's sovereign plan (v. 7). In addition, he reminds his hearers that God has given the Gentiles the Holy Spirit (v. 8; 10:44,47; 11:17). This too is proof that Jews and Gentiles were on equal footing. Finally, he reminds them that God makes no distinction between Gentile and Jew (v. 9); he shows no partiality (10:34). Therefore, God's declaration has already been made, and no one should put any additional burden on Gentile Christians (v. 10). Peter shows that the real boundary marker between alienation from God and salvation is not circumcision but faith. The Gentiles heard the gospel and believed it (v. 7).¹ Therefore,

¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-centered exposition (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017).

God cleansed their hearts by faith (v. 9; cf. 10:15; 11:9). Jewish Christians too are saved by believing, just like the Gentiles (v. 11). Cornelius had been accepted by faith, not by circumcision. That's the only way anyone is accepted by God. Salvation is by faith alone; it has nothing to do with the circumcision of one's flesh. Peter sounded a lot like Paul. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, we find many of the same themes mentioned:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, a curse be on him! As we have said before, I now say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, a curse be on him! (Gal 1:8-9)

Getting the gospel right is a matter of first importance, so the apostle tells the Galatians to watch out for false teachers, who should be cursed for preaching a different gospel. He concludes his letter by saying, "Both circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing; what matters instead is a new creation" (Gal 6:15). Because everyone is saved by grace through faith, familial fellowship is possible—although Paul even had to confront Peter on the matter on a different occasion (Gal 2:11-14). We too must defend the gospel, never emphasizing external ritual but always internal transformation.

After Peter's speech, Paul and Barnabas pick up the mic. They have already shared their experiences with the leaders (v. 4), but now they speak before all. Essentially, they say that God endorsed their trip to the Gentiles by extending his grace. By only recording this brief verse, Luke draws attention to the fact that the main appeal they made in the debate wasn't based on their experiences alone. They interpreted their experiences in light of Scripture, which James offered next.

James was first mentioned in 12:17, after the martyrdom of the apostle James. He was Jesus's half brother and became author of the Bible book bearing his name. He was recognized as a pillar of the Jerusalem church, along with Peter and John (Gal 2:9). James affirms the others' defense of a circumcision-free gospel and goes on to offer a suggestion about establishing fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. He begins by affirming the words of "Simeon" (another name for Simon Peter), who said the Gentile mission was God's plan. James provides scriptural support to strengthen Peter's claim that God's plan includes having a people for himself from all nations. Prior to quoting Amos 9:11-12, he says, "The words of the prophets agree with this," implying that this Amos text reflects what the prophets teach in general. He could have cited a bunch of prophetic texts about the Gentiles (Isa 2:2; 45:20-23; Jer 12:15-16; Hos 3:4-5; Zech 2:11; 8:22; and also Paul in Rom 15:7-13). The point is that James stresses fulfillment; all the prophets agree with Peter's claims.¹ Since the Gentiles are now in fact turning to the Messiah as the prophets foretold,

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James argues that the Gentiles shouldn't be burdened with issues of the law (v. 19). So now we have Peter, Paul, and James in agreement. All obstacles to the gospel of grace should be removed, and the Gentiles should be welcomed to trust in Christ alone and join the community of faith.

Grace Displayed

Having established the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, apart from works of the law, James suggests an appeal to the Gentiles to avoid some practices that may offend Jewish believers. (His goal is to encourage healthy fellowship.) James wants the Gentiles to know that where Moses is read and respected, Jewish believers might be understandably sensitive about certain things; thus, out of love for their brothers, the Gentiles should avoid certain practices. And if they aren't familiar with Jewish practices, they can hear Moses's writings for themselves. Here James models how one should display grace toward other Christians who may be offended by particular practices. The four requirements James outlines are all basically ritual matters aimed at making fellowship possible between Jewish and Gentile Christians. He asks the Gentile believers to avoid contact with (1) pollution that comes from idols, (2) immorality (probably the kind associated with pagan rites and temple prostitution, though he may also have interfamilial relations in view; Lev 17–18), (3) strangled things (probably a reference to what happens to animals consumed among the Gentiles), and (4) blood (Leviticus prohibits eating meat with blood that hasn't been properly drained; cf. Lev 17:10-14; Acts 15:29; 21:25). James provided a wise policy that would uphold the gospel of grace while helping preserve Jew-Gentile fellowship. Thus grace is defended and displayed.

Grace Delivered and Described

The entire council agreed with James, so the apostles, elders, and the whole church decided that some men should accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch to give a report on the meeting. They select Judas, also called Barsabbas, and Silas, who probably was the "Silvanus" who became closely associated with Paul and Peter (15:40; cf. 2 Cor 1:19; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; 1 Pet 5:12). These were "leading men among the brothers" (v. 22). They were sent to deliver the letter. This piece of correspondence contained three points. First, the council rejected the circumcision party's insistence on circumcision as a condition for salvation. Second, the delegates, who would not only deliver the letter but also give an oral description of the matter, had the council's full approval and authorization. Finally, they emphasized the Spirit-directed unanimous decision not to burden Gentiles with anything (like insistence on circumcision) but to request that the Gentiles abstain from four particular matters which upheld Christian distinctions from the world they were called to. With this letter, the messengers head to Antioch. When those in Antioch heard it, they rejoiced that the Gentile Christians were accepted into the family of God; they didn't need to adopt a Jewish way of life. Judas and Silas, who are noted as "prophets," stayed in Antioch for a while and provided much encouragement and comfort to the church (v. 32). This concludes with a peaceful and joyful display of unity among different groups of Christians. Paul and Barnabas continue to proclaim God's Word in Antioch (vv. 34-35), setting the stage for the second missionary journey.

We must learn at least two lessons from the Jerusalem Council, one regarding Christian truth and the other Christian love. We Must Never Abandon the Gospel of Grace. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It comes apart from works of the law (Phil 3:1-11). We must never bend on this truth. Jesus's work is sufficient. We need to rest in his grace and proclaim it to the world.¹ And We

¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-centered exposition (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017).

Must Lovingly Preserve the Unity of the Body. There will be times in which Christians should abstain from certain liberties in order to maintain peaceful social interactions with others. Christians with strong consciences should never violate the consciences of weaker or newer brothers and sisters. We should limit our liberty out of love for the those at a delicate place in their journey of faith (Rom 14; 1 Cor 8–9). John Newton said this about Paul’s dual commitment to the gospel and charitable flexibility with other Christians: “Paul was a reed in non-essentials; an iron pillar in essentials.” Let’s follow his lead for the good of the church, for the advancement of the gospel among all nations, and for the glory of Jesus.¹

IN ESSENTIALS, UNITY, IN NON-ESSENTIALS, LIBERTY, IN ALL THINGS, CHARITY.

REFLECT & DISCUSS

- Why might it be challenging for some to embrace the message of grace?
- What “Jesus-plus” gospels have you heard taught? How might this passage help you formulate a response to them?
- What about Peter’s speech most resonates with you?
- Why is the use of Scripture important for mediating conflict?
- What does this passage teach about essentials and nonessentials of the faith?

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