

Part 26: The Clarity of Gospel Belief

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This church existed prior to 1968 as part of a group of churches known as the EUB, “The Evangelical United Brethren.” But in 1968, this church was re-established having lost everything.

That’s because in the late 1960’s the EUB had proposed a merger with the Methodist church—and while the Methodists had a rich history of orthodoxy, American Methodism had given up the idea that clear doctrine mattered. In fact one of their leaders had written an article stating that: “Emphasis on correct belief has given way to being or embodying the gospel and proclaiming it by life as well as word. The key issues in evangelism today are race, poverty, leisure time, Jewish-Christian dialog, city planning, and reforming the church’s life around people’s needs.”

To make it clear, he is saying the time had passed for the church to be concerned about what we believe regarding theology and the Bible, instead we needed to be more concerned about the social issues—“reforming the church’s life around the people’s needs.”

Our church joined with several other churches in Montana to write a paper stating their dissent and resistance to a merger with a group of churches that believed so little about belief. In bold typewriter font they said, “Doctrine is an absolute essential for us.”

These kind of convictional theological stands and discussions are rich in Christian history. It’s the legacy of the Reformation, when in the 1500’s Luther was placed on trial for his defense of the Biblical doctrine of salvation by faith alone. There he stood bravely and said, “Here I stand and I can do no other. God help me.”

Similarly you can see how the church took similar stances in Chalcedon in the 5th Century, and Nicea in the 4th Century—each fighting for clarity on doctrine. And today we can look at our passage in Acts 15, what is often called the “Jerusalem Council.” It’s here where the church in Antioch and the church in Jerusalem, along with their elders, apostles and leaders gathered together to define: “What is the gospel.”

Seeing such a history you can come to one of two conclusions. The first conclusion you can come to is the secular idea that Christians define doctrine because Christians create doctrine. It’s as if the church always had diverse views of salvation, and they got together to see which one they seemed to like the most or had the most support. If this is the position you come to—then matters of right doctrine are harmful and divisive at worst and trivial at best.

But what we see modeled in our text today reveals to us another way to view these quests for clarity. This is not that Christians define doctrine because Christians create doctrine—this is the reality that Christians define doctrine because doctrine creates the Christian.

Whether it’s the opening line of the Apostle’s Creed, “We believe in God the Father almighty maker of heaven and earth,” whether it’s John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life,” whether it’s the creed in your

neighbor's lawn, "In this home we believe, black lives matter, women's rights are human rights, no human is illegal, science is real, love is love and kindness is everything," or Peter's profession today in **Acts 15:11**, "We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will..." what we believe shapes everything.

All belief is precise belief. All belief shows up with clarity—but what do Christians believe and what does it actually clarify?

This is the issue the church sets out to settle today—and it's an issue that's needed today in a unique way. You see because the Bible saves people from all different backgrounds we might think the gospel itself, and the belief it entails is also diverse. But the gospel saves a diverse people—but what Christians believe about salvation is not diverse.

This will be our main point this morning: **The church makes distinct the gospel that saves without distinction.** My guess is that if you are a Christian in here, and especially a member, this seems self-evident. But as we work through this passage I think we will find places where we might not have the clarity we think—or we might see ways in which our lives aren't living in light of the clarity we confess.

This passage today shows us what we lose if we lose the gospel. While no Christian knows the deep truths of God fully—all Christians must know the gospel truth of God clearly. Without gospel clarity we have **no evangelism, no church, no conversion, no Bible and no access to God.**

To begin today let's read our opening verses, **Acts 14:24-28**, "Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they remained no little time with the disciples."

This context is important. If you remember back in Acts 13, the church set apart Paul and Barnabas to go and preach Christ as missionaries. What we have seen in the last two chapters was just that—and when they returned the church was eager to hear how it went.

Paul and Barnabas' return gathered the whole church. A church who believes the gospel is eager and anxious for others to hear the gospel. A concern for God's glory over our own makes us more concerned about what work God is doing in the world than anything else in the world.

And what was the content of their message, "All that God had done with them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." God had done a work—and the church rejoiced!

But the joy was short lived. This is our first point this morning: **Without gospel clarity we have no evangelism.** Look at what happened next: **Acts 15:1**, "But some men came down for Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'"

If you have your Bible's open, you can skip down to verse 24 and see that this statement troubled and unsettled those who were just rejoicing. Why? I wonder if you've experienced the shock of good news gone wrong.

Maybe, you let your child know that you'd be able to make their ball game—but you got caught up in something and couldn't do it. Maybe, you had let people know that you were pregnant only to suffer a miscarriage? Maybe, you were given an "all-clear" on a medical report only to get a call the next day that the test were wrong and you need to come back in because the disease might still be there.

Well, Paul and Barnabas had just risked their lives on the first missionary journey bringing the message of salvation from sin through faith alone to Gentiles all across Asia—and those Gentiles rejoiced at their salvation, and the Antioch church rejoiced at their salvation—but now these men from Jerusalem come up and say to them, "You risked your life for nothing and you gave them a false promise of salvation. Unless they are circumcised they cannot be saved."

These men didn't argue about the need for faith in Jesus—they just said that faith in Jesus wasn't enough. The Old Testament required that God's people accept and keep the customs of Moses, the law of circumcision—and if you believe in Jesus that's just the first part of salvation. To finish it, there's more.

But notice how unclear, or legalistic views of the gospel suck all the joy and all the freedom out of the room. Sometimes I think we can accidentally come to the conclusion that all Christianity is, is brand name religion. We call every tissue, a Kleenex. But Kleenex is a brand of tissue. People buy Puffs brand tissues and call it "Kleenex," but it's not that big of a deal.

We can often think that Christianity is the best religion, the brand name religion, but as long as people are religious, as long as they talk of Jesus and faith in God—aren't we all just using tissues?

But what this whole debate shows is that if faith alone in Jesus doesn't save, or if there are other ways of salvation—then Christianity offers nothing. There's no joy in it. If faith alone in Jesus Christ is insufficient, or not exclusive—then we've found something—but we have not found salvation.

No one gives their lives to get a box of properly branded tissues into the hands of dying people. People don't need their noses wiped—people need their sin dealt with. And if Jesus can't do it, then we have nothing good to offer, nothing joyful to worship and nothing compelling in life.

Church, remember how Peter, who speaks later on in this passage, speaks of evangelism: **1 Peter 3:15**, "in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you." The hope of the Christian is Christ in you, and if Christ is not a sufficient hope to save—then we will never share the gospel.

I wonder how many of us need to repent not because we don't share the gospel—but because we don't believe the gospel. While we would never confess it as clearly as it is here—we act as if Jesus is only part of the equation of salvation. If people could just get a job and hold it, buy a house, stay in shape, and be a good person—they'll be fine. But if what the Bible says is true, then there is no such thing as good news for anyone unless that good news is in Jesus Christ.

Second, notice how **Without gospel clarity we have no church.**

Read with me: **Acts 15:2-6**, "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. 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. 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. 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.” The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.”

I met with a man once who moved from the Catholic Church to the Lutheran Church. I asked him what differences he noticed and he said, “Well, they are basically the same. I mean, if you want to have conversations about *sola fide* (faith alone) over coffee—that’s fine. But it doesn’t really matter to most of us in the church.”

It’s often easy to come to the conclusion that if we need to be clear on doctrine—then it’s just the pastors and the theologians who would care about it anyway. They might want to have these nerdy conversations—but as long as people believe in Jesus—it doesn’t matter.

But notice who called this council? The elders and apostles didn’t say, “Hey, let’s figure this out.” Instead it was the church in Antioch—normal members, ordinary believers, who sent this group to the church in Jerusalem and said, “You need to figure this out.”

Why? Because the church as a whole rightly knew two things. First they knew that the doctrine of the faith is defended by church leaders, but it is the responsibility of the whole church. Paul, the same Paul present in this passage today, wrote to men and women in 1 Timothy, then he wrote to elders and deacons, but when he talks about doctrine he calls, “the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”

Sovereign Hope, it is your responsibility to not assume clarity on the gospel. It is your responsibility to hold your leaders accountable to the gospel. The history of this church is a congregation who not only confessed faith in Jesus—but understood it deeply and significantly enough that they were willing to lose everything over it. Do you know how faith in Jesus saves? Can you tell someone why Jesus is not one of many options? Can you tell someone one Jesus isn’t the first step of salvation, but instead the whole of it?

It’s of secondary importance because there is no church apart from what a church believes. If you want to be a diverse church, a welcoming church, and a loving church—then you must have clarity on the belief that makes a church a church. If the church is just a collection of people who like each other—then you don’t need to dicker over doctrine.

But if the church is first and foremost those who have been saved by grace through faith—then you must know what the faith that saves truly is! True belonging in the church is exclusively based on what we believe as the church. Salvation, not station in life, creates the church. Faith, not friendship, creates the church.

The nature of our belonging to each other is dependent upon who belongs to God. This is the very case Peter makes as he takes the microphone. Here is our third point this morning: **Without gospel clarity we have no conversion.**

Acts 15:7-9, "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. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith."

If you are just joining us in the book of Acts, Peter is referencing the conversion of Cornelius from Acts chapter 11 where the Holy Spirit drew Peter and Cornelius together so that Cornelius, the Gentiles soldier, and his family could hear the gospel, believe and be saved.

But notice the distinct emphasis of Peter's declaration vs. the declaration of the others. Back in verse 1 the message was, "You must be circumcised to be saved." In verse 5 they say, "We must circumcise them to be saved."

What's the way in which someone is converted? Well, it seems its either, "Here's the work you must do to be saved," or "Here's the work we must do to you in order to be saved."

We often say at Sovereign Hope, "the gospel is the good news that Jesus did everything requires to save sinners and restore us to God." But the dangerous message of false gospels is, "The gospel is the good news that Jesus did everything requires so that you can do the work of saving yourself."

The issue, as we saw earlier, is the conversion of the Gentiles. And what Peter is saying here is that the gospel doesn't produce half-converts. He already said that God opened the door of faith. Faith doesn't open a door—faith is the door.

Look at the difference of Peter's message of conversion verse the others. In verse 7 he says the salvation of the Gentiles was "God's choice," and that he ordained the Gentiles would "hear the word of the gospel and believe." Moreover, God bore witness to them being saved when God gave the Holy Spirit, and God made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles—why? Because God cleansed their hearts by faith.

And here the question that's been unanswered the whole time is finally answered. This is really the question the Jewish Christians had too: If God is holy, how can sinful people be with him? By the Old Testament standards this is what the law did—the law cleansed. That's what circumcision was meant to be a representation of—the removal of our sin nature and the heritage of Adam and the promise new life in God.

But what we see here is that God's plan was a deeper cleansing—a new conversion. A conversion not of the external circumcision according to the law—but of internal circumcision according to Christ. What Peter is saying is that this was God's plan the whole time—as Moses himself said in **Deuteronomy 30:6**, "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."

The confused Jewish Christians keep saying, “Someone’s got to circumcise someone in order for anyone to be cleansed.” But Peter is saying, “God has done it!” God removes the flesh of skin from our heart. How? By faith! Paul says this in **Colossians 1:11-12**, “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God.”

Dear church—do you know how God converts? Do you know enough to stand and marvel at it? Do you know enough to rejoice in the love of it? Do you love others enough to fight for it? Do you trust it enough to bank your life on us?

Faith washes us clean by Jesus’ work on the cross. That’s the powerful work that cleanses us. That’s what saves us. God knows our hearts in sin—but by conversion God knows our hearts as cleansed by Christ.

To deny or debate this is not to debate God’s salvation—it is to debate God himself. That’s what Peter says isn’t it. **Verses 10-11**, “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 are able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

To the believer—to doubt God is able to save anyone by faith in his divine someone is to test God yourself. To the sinner who thinks that your sin is too great—throw your false humility down, let the cross reveal your hidden pride, and let Jesus wash you clean. Come to him, let his work take its hold by faith and be saved. For apart from faith—we have nothing.

Next, and very briefly, **Without gospel clarity we have no Bible**. Notice what happens next. **Acts 15:12-16** “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. After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the word of the prophets agree, just as it is written ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuilt the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuilt its ruins, and I will restore it...”

James is going to go on to quote from the Old Testament prophet Amos. The Jews split up the Old Testament largely into two parts: the law and the prophets. And here, James is showing that the Old Testament itself tells us that God was going to save a people from all nations. What’s interesting is that even though he’s largely quoting Amos 9, James doesn’t speak of the “prophet” singular, but of “prophets.”

God’s visitation of all people through faith in Jesus is in agreement with all of God’s Old Testament. Jesus himself said this to the unbelieving Pharisees in **John 5:39**, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me.”

Jesus isn’t saying the Old Testament doesn’t lead to eternal life—but he’s showing us how it does. The Old Testament leads to Jesus and our faith in him. If you don’t understand that Aslan is meant to reveal to us the character and nature of God—then Narnia is a great book—but you’ve never actually read it. That’s what Lewis meant for it to do. And, if you don’t understand how God saves us by faith through the cross of Jesus—then you’ll never understand the Bible—God means for us to meet Jesus on every page.

When we see faith in Jesus as the saving ends of God—we see it all throughout scripture. The Bible isn't first calling you to see who you are or where you are going. The Bible is calling you to see Jesus and to repent and believe in him.

And this realization, changes everything. This is our final point: **Without gospel clarity we have no access to the glory of God.**

Let's read again the closing portion here: **Acts 15:15-19**, "And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, " '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, 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 known from of old.' Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God."

We will talk about this more next week because we stop James midsentence. But notice how the clarity on the gospel brought clarity in terms of their actions. James knew how to respond because he knew how God had worked to save.

But notice why this clarification of doctrine was so important. Whether you belonged to the fallen line of David, the Jews, or whether you belong to the Gentile nations—how are we saved? Not by seeking right doctrine—but by seeking the Lord.

God has called us to seek him—but he has told us how we are to seek him—through faith in Jesus. In other words the clear witness of Peter, Paul, Barnabas, James and the Old Testament is that if you want to seek God and see God in all his glory, in all his love, in all his mercy, in all his comfort, in all his restoring wonder—then you must seek him in and through the gospel.

Clarity on the good news of God's salvation is clarity on the heart of the God who saves. We will only seek God as attractive and seek him appropriately when we let the gospel show us our sin and the source of our salvation.

This means that if you don't have clarity on how God saves you and the wonderful reality of faith in Jesus—you will never see God in his glory. You can run to the mountains, you can run to the bedroom, you can run to riches, you can run to resorts, and hobbies, hunting and family. But who we need to seek is the Lord, the Lord of glory. And if we want to see him, the only one who is able to save, then we must seek him where he is found—faith in Jesus Christ.

This conviction changes everything. Brothers and sisters, do you see that because we have this message—we have good news to share with others and a joy that we can firmly offer. Do you realize that we have the foundation of relationships in the church that supersede worldly comforts and display supernatural affection? Do you realize that we have the good news of being converted by the work of God, the grace of Jesus and the assurance of the Holy Spirit? Do you realize that we have been given his word which leads us again and again with clarity to the implications of our salvation? And do you realize that we have access to the glory, comfort and clarity of living life in light of the glory of this God?

For this reason, and to this end, "We believe" and may others do so as well.