

The Point: God calls us to proclaim the message that salvation is available through faith in Christ alone, not through works.

HIS STORY

The Question of Whether Jesus Alone is Enough to Save

When Paul and Barnabas heard what the men were teaching, they confronted them and argued about this matter with them. The whole debate can be boiled down to the question of whether Jesus alone is sufficient for salvation, or if something else—such as circumcision in this case—was needed in addition.

Paul and Barnabas rejected their teaching for at least two reasons. The primary reason concerned the core of the gospel—salvation by grace through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9). The men from Judea were teaching that faith alone was not sufficient for salvation. They argued that a person first had to belong to God’s covenant community, the people of Israel, and that becoming part of God’s community required the mark of circumcision. Paul and Barnabas understood that you do not have to be part of the right people before you can be saved; anyone, anywhere can be saved the moment they trust in Jesus Christ.

► **What are some issues we need to defend, like Paul and Barnabas defended the Gentiles’ salvation?**

Letting Scripture Settle the Dispute

Peter then presented God’s gift of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles as evidence of the Gentiles’ conversion apart from circumcision. God had given the Gentile believers the Holy Spirit just as He had given the Holy Spirit to them. No distinction was made based on circumcision or any other factor—everyone had been saved by faith, and the giving of the Holy Spirit confirmed that God accepted that faith.

After Peter finished, the entire assembly fell completely silent. Peter’s strong defense of the gospel resonated with the gathering. Paul and Barnabas then took the opportunity to echo Peter and share how God had worked through them to see Gentiles come to faith. Paul and Barnabas relayed story after story of how God had transformed the lives of many Gentiles.

Essential Doctrines

Justification and Works: *Justification is not the result of human effort or good works; it comes through faith in the righteousness of Christ. Although good works do not lead to justification, justification leads to good works in the life of a believer (Eph. 2:10). Faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:17). While good works do not establish justification, they do verify a genuine faith and make our justification evident to others.*

Leader Note: Because some content from the Personal Study Guide will not be available on the One Sheet, make sure to adapt the session based on how you use the material with your group.

YOUR STORY

- ▶ **Why do some Christians struggle to accept that salvation is by grace alone and we don't need to do anything to earn or keep it?**
- ▶ **What are some of the dangers of relying on our experiences to validate what God is doing? How can we safeguard against those dangers?**
- ▶ **If someone said being a good person plus faith in Jesus is what saves a person, then how would you respond?**
- ▶ **What can we learn from this account about how to deal with controversies within the church today?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

The way the Jerusalem Council handled the dispute surrounding circumcision in Acts 15 is an example for how we should handle disputes in the church today. We address disagreements as they arise, appeal to Scripture and what God has done, and call for freedom in Christ and love to guide how we all live together after the issue has been resolved. The Jerusalem Council also emphasized the sufficiency of faith in Jesus for salvation and inclusion into God's family by stating that He alone is all we need for salvation. The early church protected the core message of the gospel.

- ▶ **Why is the doctrine of faith alone in Christ alone and not works so important?**
- ▶ **What can we learn from the way the early church addressed controversy that applies to how we address controversy today?**

Heart

Circumcision had been a mark of purity and separateness from the world for God's people. Now, in Christ, that mark comes by faith. In Christ, purity and separateness do not lead into salvation, but instead flow out of it. Requiring circumcision before salvation undermined this essential aspect of the gospel. As the apostle Paul would say elsewhere, those who follow Christ experience a circumcision of the heart when they put off the old self and take up the new (Rom. 2:28-29). It is the inner life of faith in Christ that is important, not a ritual act.

- ▶ **Why is it important for us to stress that purity flows from faith rather than preceding faith?**
- ▶ **What are some other ways our lives demonstrate a genuine faith in Christ?**

Hands

Requiring a Gentile to be circumcised before salvation would mean they had to do something to earn the right to be saved, but no one is worthy to be saved. No one deserves an invitation into a relationship with the living God. Salvation is by grace. Grace initiated it. Grace sustained it. Grace fulfills it. Gentiles should not have to do something to earn salvation when no one else did anything to deserve it either.

- ▶ **What are some beliefs and traditions we hold onto that may interfere with others understanding the gospel?**
- ▶ **How should the truth that salvation is by grace rather than works change the way we live?**