

# We R2B a Gospel-Centered People

Acts 15:1-31, Ephesians 4:1-6

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## Introduction

When disagreements threaten to divide, a deep commitment to the **Gospel –salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone–** serves as the immovable anchor that guides our doctrine, informs our practice, and preserves the essential unity of the church.

I grew up in a paradigm where church-splits were a common occurrence. We always had a joke about a church splitting over the color of the carpet. The history of the Christian church is rife with tales of conflict sometimes leading to just a split, other times leading to war. **Conflict is inevitable, even among believers, but must be the exception and not the rule!** Satan wants to weaken the church through conflict, dissension, and fighting. We must practice being a Gospel-Centered church in order to maintain church health.

**The Problem:** In Acts 15 the early church, despite its miraculous beginnings, faced a significant conflict: **How are people truly saved?** Are Gentile believers required to follow Jewish law, specifically circumcision, to be part of God's people?

**The Stakes:** This wasn't a minor squabble. This controversy threatened to split the burgeoning Christian movement along ethnic and theological lines, undermining the very message they proclaimed.

**The Solution:** Acts 15 shows us how the early church, guided by the Holy Spirit, navigated this stormy disagreement by remaining fearlessly **Gospel-Centered**.

**Definition:** To be **Gospel-centered** simply means keeping the **Good News of Jesus Christ** first and foremost in everything we do. Our **We R2B** identity calls us to embody this truth –to truly **be** people who hold the Gospel in the very depths of who we are, as individuals, and as His Church.

Let's look at Acts 15 to see how gospel-centeredness leads to unity in spite of conflict.

## 1. Disunity: Legalism's Threat to the Gospel (Acts 15:1)

### A. The Challenge from Judea

**"Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'"** (Acts 15:1)

**The Core Issue:** This was a direct attack on the sufficiency of Christ's work. It added human effort (circumcision, law-keeping) to God's grace.

**The Deception of Legalism:** In Christian theology, legalism refers to a distorted view of faith where salvation and spiritual growth are believed to be achieved through strict adherence to rules and regulations, rather than through grace and faith in Jesus Christ. It often involves an emphasis on external actions and behaviors over internal transformation and a genuine relationship with God.

Legalism is a trap, usually for “the other person.” Most legalists piously think of themselves as better or having achieved whatever they believe to be the goal.... But they always get trapped in their own legalism. Legalism is a killer! Legalism kills love!

Be aware: Pharisee-ism did not die out in the first century. There are pharisees still walking around.

In the context of Acts 15, legalism is **adding requirements to salvation beyond faith in Christ**. It sounds "holy" or "dedicated," but it actually undermines grace and robs God of glory.

## **B. The Response in Antioch**

***"This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them."*** (Acts 15:2)

**Righteous Indignation:** Why was this so contentious? Because **Paul and Barnabas understood the purity of the Gospel was at stake**. This wasn't a minor preference; it was foundational truth **2B a Gospel-Centered People**.

**Taking it to the Source:** They didn't let it fester. They took the issue to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. This demonstrates healthy conflict resolution: addressing it, seeking wisdom, and going to the proper leadership.

Remember the early Church did not have the fully formed New Testament. They had the texts of what we now call the Old Testament, and the teaching of Jesus as witnessed by the apostles.

**Application:** What human additions or requirements do we sometimes subtly or overtly add to the pure Gospel message, threatening its simplicity and power?

How do **We as a Gospel-Centered People** respond when the core truth of salvation by grace is challenged?

## **2. Unity Through Deliberation: Anchored in Gospel Truth (Acts 15:6-21)**

### **A. The Debate and Peter's Testimony (v. 6-11)**

***"Much discussion"*** (v. 7): Acknowledges that real dialogue and disagreement happened. It wasn't instantly resolved.

**Peter's Experience** (v. 7-9): He recounts God's work among Gentiles (Cornelius), giving them the Holy Spirit *without* circumcision or adherence to the Mosaic law.

**The Core:**

***"Why then do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."*** (v. 10-11)

This is the clearest articulation of gospel-centeredness. **Salvation is by grace through Jesus**, not by law. Legalism is a burden no one can bear. This is the heart of a Gospel-Centered People. Paul restated this in his letter to the Ephesians, 2:8 ***"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God..."***

### **B. Paul & Barnabas's Evidence (v. 12)**

They share stories of God's miraculous work among the Gentiles through them, confirming Peter's testimony. God was clearly blessing Gentile believers *without* circumcision.

### **C. James's Wisdom and Scriptural Confirmation (v. 13-21)**

**The Peacemaker:** James, a leader in the Jerusalem church, affirms Peter's testimony and the evidence from Paul/Barnabas.

**Scriptural Grounding** (v. 15-18, Amos 9:11-12): He roots the decision in the Old Testament prophets, showing that Gentile inclusion was always part of God's plan.

**The Resolution** (v. 19-21): The decision to not burden Gentile converts with circumcision, but to ask them to abstain from things that would deeply offend Jewish believers (idolatry, sexual immorality,

blood/strangled meat). This wasn't about salvation, but about loving one's neighbor and promoting fellowship.

**Application:** How **R we 2B a Gospel-Centered People** engaged in healthy, gospel-centered deliberation when we face disagreements? Are we willing to listen to testimony, examine Scripture, and allow the clear truth of the Gospel to be our guide, even if it challenges our traditions or preferences?

Before we get to our third point, I want to nail this down (nail it to the cross). Let's take a Legalist Quiz.

### **You Know You're a Legalist If... (and the Gospel-Centered Counterpoint)**

Determining if one harbors legalistic tendencies isn't about a simple checklist, as legalism often operates subtly within our hearts and minds. Instead, it's about examining our underlying motivations, attitudes, and the true source of our assurance and joy. Here are some indicators of legalism, followed by the liberating truth of a Gospel-centered life:

**– You know you're a legalist if: Your assurance and peace with God fluctuate based on your performance.** You feel "right with God" when you attend church consistently, read your Bible daily, avoid sin, serve diligently, or give generously. Your peace is directly tied to how well you are performing.

**... But you are Gospel-centered if: Your peace and assurance are rooted in what Jesus did for you.** You know you are right with God because of His finished work on the cross, not your fluctuating obedience. You obey Him out of love and gratitude, not to earn favor or maintain a feeling of acceptance.

**– You know you're a legalist if: You believe your good works contribute to your salvation or make you more acceptable to God.** You might feel your obedience makes you superior to others or gives you a right to God's blessings.

**... But you are Gospel-centered if: Your good works are a response to God's grace and a natural demonstration of your faith.** They are the fruit of salvation, not the root. Your obedience is a joyful, grateful expression of love for God and others.

**– You know you're a legalist if: When you sin, your primary emotion is shame, guilt, or fear of punishment.** You might dread that you've lost God's favor, or immediately try to "make up for it" with more religious activity.

**... But you are Gospel-centered if: When you sin, you feel sorrow over grieving God, followed by genuine repentance.** You quickly return to God's grace, trusting in His immediate forgiveness and cleansing through Christ's atonement, knowing His favor is secure.

**– You know you're a legalist if... You judge other believers who don't follow your specific practices or convictions, believing they aren't as spiritual or perhaps not true believers.** You judge them based on their adherence to your external standards (e.g., specific dress codes, entertainment choices, dietary rules, or certain forms of ministry).

**... But you are Gospel-centered if: You extend grace, recognizing that Christ unites us.** You focus on core Gospel truths and allow for Christian liberty in non-essentials, loving others despite differences in conviction.

**– You know you're a legalist if... Your reaction to grace is suspicion, fearing it might lead to people taking sin lightly.** You believe the solution is more rules and clearer boundaries to ensure holiness. You often struggle to fully grasp or extend unconditional love and forgiveness.

**... But you are Gospel-centered if: You see grace as liberating and profoundly empowering.** You understand that grace is the engine of true transformation and the greatest motivation for genuine holiness.

– You know you're a legalist if... You add human rules or traditions to God's commands and treat them as divine requirements for salvation or sanctification for all believers. You might say, "You *must* do X, Y, or Z to be a 'true' Christian or to be truly spiritual."

... But you are Gospel-centered if: You diligently adhere to God's clear commands, while recognizing that traditions can be helpful but are never on par with God's Word. They are not prerequisites for salvation or spiritual maturity.

– You know you're a legalist if... Your motivation for ministry or service is primarily to gain recognition, prove your worth, earn God's blessing, or appear righteous to others.

... But you are Gospel-centered if: Your motivation for ministry and service flows purely out of love for God and others, in joyful response to God's overflowing grace, and for the advancement of His Kingdom.

– You know you're a legalist if... You find yourself more focused on what you *don't* do than what you *do*, or on outward appearance over inward transformation. You might be proud of your abstentions, ensuring your life looks good on the outside, even if your heart struggles.

... But you are Gospel-centered if: Your focus is on your growing love for God and people, and the inward work of the Holy Spirit. This internal transformation naturally produces authentic, outward fruit.

In essence, legalism is a functional belief that our standing with God is based on our performance rather than solely on Christ's performance for us. It often manifests as judging others, lacking assurance, having a joyless faith, and prioritizing external adherence over internal transformation and relational love.

### 3. True Unity: Restoration in Christ and Rejoicing! (Acts 15:22-31)

#### A. The Official Communication (v. 22-29)

**A Unified Voice:** The apostles and elders send a letter, through trusted representatives (Judas and Silas), communicating their decision. This prevents further confusion and misrepresentation.

**Emphasis on the Spirit:** *"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"* (v. 28). The decision was Spirit-led, demonstrating divine authority behind the Gospel's truth.

#### B. The Joyful Reception in Antioch (v. 30-31)

*"The people were delighted with its encouraging message."*

**Unity Preserved:** The Gospel was affirmed, legalism was rejected, and the church remained united around the essential message. This allowed the mission to continue unimpeded. This is the fruit of **a Gospel-Centered People**.

**Restoration:** The relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers was restored, paving the way for deeper fellowship and continued growth of the church.

#### C. Unity in the Church Defined (Ephesians 4:1-7)

*<sup>1</sup> I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. <sup>7</sup> But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.*

**Application:** What are the markers of true gospel-centered unity in our church and personal lives? How can we **be a Gospel-Centered People**, proactively encouraging unity by prioritizing the Gospel above all else, even in our disagreements?

How does a clear, pure Gospel message lead to genuine joy and spiritual growth?

## Conclusion: Our Enduring Anchor

Conflict is inevitable, but how we respond matters.

Legalism is a constant threat that obscures the simple truth of God's grace and Christ's finished work.

**Gospel-centeredness** provides the unshakeable foundation for navigating conflict, judging doctrine, and making decisions that honor God.

The **outcome** of gospel-centeredness **is unity and joy**.

Ultimately, **We R2B a Gospel-Centered People!**

This isn't just a label; it's our identity and our calling.

### Challenge:

Examine your own heart: Are there areas where you might be adding to or subtracting from the simple gospel of grace?

In disagreements, do you anchor yourself to the core truths of salvation in Christ alone?

Commit to living as a "Gospel-Centered People" – in your personal faith, your family, your small group, and in the broader church. Let the clarity and power of the Gospel be the reason we stand united, even when other issues seem to divide us.

We R2B a people of the Word, who enjoy deep fellowship and share communion with each other. We are a generous, servant people of passionate, persistent prayer who are missional and Gospel-Centered!

Determining if one is a legalist isn't about a simple checklist, as legalism often operates subtly. Instead, it's about examining underlying motivations, attitudes, and the source of one's assurance and joy.

Next are some questions and characteristics that can serve as a "test" for legalistic tendencies.

## The "Test" of Legalism: Questions for Self-Reflection

### 1. Where do you find your assurance and peace with God?

**Legalism:** "I am right with God because I perform well (attend church, read my Bible, don't sin, serve, give, etc.). My peace fluctuates with my performance."

**Gospel-Centered:** "I am right with God because of what Jesus did for me. My peace is rooted in His finished work on the cross, not my fluctuating performance. I obey out of love and gratitude, not to earn favor."

### 2. How do you view your good works and obedience?

**Legalism:** "My good works contribute to my salvation or make me more acceptable to God. My obedience makes me superior to others or gives me a right to God's blessings."

**Gospel-Centered:** "My good works are a *response* to God's grace and a demonstration of my faith. They are the fruit of salvation, not the root. My obedience is a joyful expression of love for God and others."

### 3. What is your primary emotion when you sin?

**Legalism:** "Shame, guilt, fear of punishment, dread that I've lost God's favor, or a quick drive to 'make up for it' with more religious activity."

**Gospel-Centered:** "Sorrow over grieving God, repentance, and a quick return to God's grace, trusting in His forgiveness and cleansing through Christ."

**4. How do you view other believers who don't follow your specific practices or convictions?**

**Legalism:** "They aren't as spiritual as I am. They're probably not true believers. I judge them based on their adherence to my external standards (e.g., specific dress codes, entertainment choices, dietary rules, or certain forms of ministry)."

**Gospel-Centered:** "I extend grace, recognizing that Christ unites us. I focus on core Gospel truths and allow for Christian liberty in non-essentials, loving them despite differences in conviction."

**5. What is your reaction to grace?**

**Legalism:** "Grace is dangerous; it might lead to people taking sin lightly. We need more rules and clearer boundaries to ensure holiness." (Often struggles to fully grasp or extend unconditional love/forgiveness).

**Gospel-Centered:** "Grace is liberating and empowering. It's the engine of transformation and the motivation for true holiness."

**6. Do you add human rules or traditions to God's commands and treat them as divine requirements for salvation or sanctification?**

**Legalism:** "You *must* do X, Y, or Z (which the Bible doesn't explicitly command for all believers) to be a 'true' Christian or to be truly spiritual."

**Gospel-Centered:** "I adhere to God's clear commands, and I recognize that traditions can be helpful, but they are never on par with God's Word and are not prerequisites for salvation or spiritual maturity."

**7. What is your motivation for ministry or service?**

**Legalism:** "To gain recognition, prove my worth, earn God's blessing, or appear righteous to others."

**Gospel-Centered:** "Out of love for God and others, in response to God's grace, and for the advancement of His Kingdom."

**8. Do you find yourself more focused on what you *don't* do than what you *do*, or on outward appearance over inward transformation?**

**Legalism:** "I'm proud of what I've abstained from. My life looks good on the outside, even if my heart struggles."

**Gospel-Centered:** "My focus is on my growing love for God and people, and the inward work of the Holy Spirit, which naturally produces outward fruit."

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