

## **EMPOWERED FOR SERVICE**

### ***COLLABORATE!***

Clay Wakefield - Sunday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017

Well, good morning, PassageWay Church. So I'm really thrown off right now, because I expected to come to a church and preach a sermon, but it feels more like a family reunion because I know so many of you. It's good to be here. I've been hearing for a while now some of the exciting things going on here, and the way God is moving, the way He is bringing people to Himself in your guys' midst, with the gospel going forth. I'm just so excited. I haven't gotten a chance to see what's going on until now, and it's a lot of fun for me.

We're going to be looking at Acts 15 today, but I want to start off with a question. That question is, What does unity look like for you all as a new church? What does it look like for you guys to come together and to move forward in unity? This is especially important while you guys are doing things like constitutions and belief statements and elders. What is it going to look like for you guys to come together and to push towards unity? This isn't going to come very naturally. The church, by definition, is a bunch of people coming together who probably otherwise would not all be in the same room. We are all over the spectrum on things. Like in a room this size, it is likely there are Republicans and Democrats in here. There is likely white collar and blue collar people in here – or no collar, I don't know what that means, but whatever kind of shirt you wear. There is likely people that take recycling very seriously, and people that just think it's dumb. Right? We're all over the map and yet we come together and we're called to find unity together in our common mission and our common goals. So the question I want you guys to be pondering on as I talk is, What does it look like for us to come together as a church and move forward in unity? What does that look like? And then the same goes for us personally. Just as we as a church need to come together to move forward, you as an individual are not going to agree with every decision that everybody else in here makes, every preference they have, or even every decision the church makes, so what does it look like for you to walk in unity personally as this church moves forward in the mission with God?

And that's what we're going to actually see played out in Acts 15. We see what it looks like for a church to come together, to press forward in unity in the midst of conflicts, in the midst of disagreement. That's all rooted in this one claim, right at the very first verse. It says that "some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" You're a Gentile, but unless you are circumcised you cannot be saved. And we find out a little later that these are actually believing Pharisees that are preaching this, and it's not just be circumcised, it's "be circumcised and keep all the law." And in verse 2, right away, Paul and Barnabas jump on that. They insist vehemently, and it says that a "major argument" took place. They considered that something worth fighting. The literal reading of that is kind of fun. It's like, "There became strife and

debate that wasn't small. There was fighting. There was arguing. It wasn't small. And it wasn't small. This was massive. That is a sharp contrast. They see the weight, they see the importance of this issue. Because the subject of circumcision in the church was a big issue (and I would imagine there were some people in the crowd who were very, very invested in whether or not they need to be circumcised in order to be saved, right? I imagine there were some people with a very strong opinion on that one.) But there's a much bigger issue going on behind the scene. It's not just about do we need to be circumcised. The bigger implication of where they land on this issue is this: Is there anything we need to DO in order to be saved? Yeah, believe in Jesus, okay—but now is there something I need to do to finish the process? Is there something I have to do in order to help God with getting these things worked out? Is there anything I must do on top of faith in Jesus? These Pharisees were claiming yes.

Now, these are believing Pharisees. So if you've been in church any amount of time, you have been trained to hate the Pharisees. I think that's one of the things the church does best. We train you to hate the Pharisees, right? And it's a pretty easy job. They're constantly arguing with Jesus, planning ways to kill Jesus, and then eventually killing Jesus. Right? So it's pretty easy to not like the Pharisees. But what we notice here is that these are Pharisees who have believed, according to verse 5. So they are religious leaders who have believed that Jesus is the promised Messiah. They are Jewish leaders, that believe that Jesus is the One they've been waiting for all along. So this isn't a matter of whether or not we need to believe in Jesus. It isn't even a matter of whether or not Gentiles can be saved. Their question is, now that they're being saved, is there something they need to do in order to be considered part of the people talking? Is there some way they have to finish it? Is there some way maybe to help God with the process? You can see this was a genuine question. As they get saved, as Gentiles get saved, as non-Jews get saved, do they then become a Jew like us? Is it their job to now assimilate into the culture, to look like us and perform the way we feel like we need to perform, the way that the Old Testament said. So this is the claim they are bringing forth, and Paul and Barnabas aren't having it. Again, there is fighting. There is debating. It wasn't small.

Then the same question though is true for us. How often have I added something on to the Gospel? The thought that we need to kind-of finish. I can think of a hundred times in the past where I would say, like, "Yes, you need to believe in Jesus, start living like this, and then you can be a Christian." Do you know what I mean? One of my biggest regrets was with my best friend in high school, when I did this very same thing to him. I genuinely wanted the best for him, I wanted him to become a Christian. He didn't grow up in a house that had any sort of church background, so I just wanted to bring him into the faith. So I preached the gospel, and then I told him how he needed to conduct his life. I put those hand-in-hand: This is what it means to follow God. So I would come up with just ridiculous lists of rules that he had to keep in order to be a Christian. Like, I had my own hierarchy that I basically handed him. Like, this is what it means to be a Christian, these are the things you're not allowed to do, these are the things that are okay. These are the sins that are a big deal to God, and these other ones, eh... Right? This is how far you can go with your girlfriend, these are the swear words you're allowed to say,

I had all kinds of rules. Don't judge me, you've been there! Come on! But I had all kinds of rules I placed on him, like these are what you've got to follow, this is what it means to be a Christian. And putting these rules on him put a weight on him that just derailed any power that God's word had for his life.

We as believers come in and are saved by faith alone, and that's the transforming work of God that then manifests itself in our lives. It's not through external rules or external obedience. The more that I would put these rules on him, the more he would push back, the more he would do them just out of obligation, and it just derailed any gospel transformation that could happen for him. And it seems harmless, doesn't it? It seems harmless to say believe in Jesus, clean up your life and you're good. But listen, if anything we add to the gospel detracts away from the gospel then we've completely missed the whole point. If it's Jesus plus right living, we have derailed any gospel transformation. Barnabas and Paul saw this. They saw this right away, and said, no, you can't add to the gospel. And, you see, it doesn't matter how genuine the Pharisees were in this. It doesn't matter how good my intentions were in trying to help my friend out, or how good the Pharisees intentions were to try to help these Gentiles clean up their lives. Truth is truth, despite our intentions. They could be that the well-meaning Pharisees that just wanted to help these Jews out, and be preaching heresy at the same time. Truth doesn't depend on how we feel about it, truth just depends on what God has revealed about it, and the scripture has revealed about it is that it is by faith alone, by the grace of Jesus through faith alone that connects us to God, and that's what Paul and Barnabas started fighting for right off the bat.

So how do they deal with this? So what do they do? They disagree. They're both believers, right, these Pharisees are believers. They both are part of the church and they are disagreeing, so what do we do? They considered this a big enough issue to take it before the church. They appealed to the governing body over a body of believers. They took it to the church. They headed down to the church in Jerusalem to get a ruling on this because it's a big deal. And as they headed down to the church, the whole way it says that they were relating at length the conversion of the Gentiles. So you'd think this may have gotten at least a little under the skin of the Pharisees. They're on their way down to get a ruling on how the Gentiles are saved, and Paul and Barnabas are going, Yeah, they' already are. We've won this argument. Right? Can they be saved or do they need to be circumcised? Nah, they're already saved.

So they travel down, and that's actually how they greet the church, they just start relaying all that God has been doing there. You know when you can't help but say something you're excited about? When God is work and saving mass amounts of people that are far from God, who have never even thought about following God. They are now being brought in, and they're celebrating this, and the Pharisees come up and say, And now they must follow the law and be circumcised in order to be saved. They're adding to the gospel here. And Peter, as a leader in the church, Peter responds in verse 7... "Peter stood up and said to them, 'Brothers, you know that some time ago God chose me to preach to the Gentiles so they would hear the message of the gospel and believe.'"

Remember, this is the formula that Acts has put forward, right? That it is our role to proclaim the gospel, and it is the job of the hearer to believe. That's it. We proclaim. The hearer believes. Just like it says in Romans 10:17, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing through the preached word of God." Our role is to preach the gospel and people then only have to believe. This is the formula we've been given. It's not believe and then... It's just believe. So Peter as a church leader stands up and says, "And God, who knows the heart, has testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between them and us, cleansing their hearts by faith. So now why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are."

So Peter flips the script on them here. He says you've all got it backwards! He just turned their question right back on them. He said, God's plan was always to save the Gentiles. But actually, they're not saved in the same way we are. We have been given this law that we're very aware that we have not been able to bear, and our ancestors have not been able to bear. We're being crushed under this weight. And we are not saved through this, but we are saved in the way they are. That's what he says right there. "We are saved in the same way as they are." For the Jew hearing that, that was scandalous. Wait, we're following suit with them? We're saved in the same way they are? Yeah, they've got no law, and they've got no hope outside of the grace of God. And we are in the same boat. And Christian, that's us. We're saved in the same way they are. It doesn't matter what kind of rules we keep, outside of the grace of God we have no hope for salvation.

This leads us to the first observation of the passage: "The message of the gospel is salvation through believing in Jesus' unearned grace apart from our efforts."

So let me tell you why this is such good news. It may not be new news to many of you, but it's so easy to fall into this mindset of, Okay, now I believe but I've got to clean up my life, right? It's so easy to believe that my standing before God ebbs and sways with my performance. I'm standing up here in front of you, and they strapped this microphone on my face and they put me on stage, and it's not because I've got this together. As a minister, I'm constantly fighting this ebb and flow. Am I doing enough ministry to people? Because there's always more ministry to be done. There's always more to do. I'm kind of wearing this burden all the time – am I doing enough? Am I meeting enough people? Have I read enough? Have I prepped this sermon enough? Am I doing a good job in ministry? Do I know where I'm taking them? If they ask me a question, will I be able to respond? These questions are in the background, and it's my job as a Christian to put things aside and know that my standing before God is not based on how am I doing in my ministry.

And it's not based on how you perform throughout your week as well. Your Father looks at you in delight through the grace that's been given to you in Jesus. He looks at you through Christ's righteousness. So when you have that excellent week where you just nail it, you've got

your one hour quiet time in every morning, you're just on fire this week, God delights in you. And when you blow it, that week where you just can't even find your Bible, everything's going wrong, you don't want to talk to anybody, you're snapping at the kids—you've all been there—God delights in you. His approval of you is not based on your performance, but on the grace granted in Jesus. We are saved in the same way these Gentiles are saved. We've got no hope outside of the grace of God. The message of the gospel is salvation by believing in Jesus' unearned grace apart from our efforts.

So Christian, if you're in the room, the call on our life is this: it is to rest in the very same gospel we believe. If we know this is true, that He saves us, apart from our efforts, but what does it look like to rest in that grace? When you look at God, how do you see Him looking at you? Is it full of love and grace? Because that's what's been offered to you. You can rest in this truth. Don't try to add to this. Now the tendency is going to be there: But I at least have to try, right? Isn't it the effort that counts? But it's not the effort that counts. If anything, it's the surrender that counts. It's the lack of effort that actually counts before God. God is not saying I know you can't do it, but at least you tried. God is saying you can't earn my favor, so stop trying because I've done it for you! Resting in that.

For those of you who are in the room who may not be believers yet, the bottom line, why we're here, what we're doing in following Jesus, we are not people coming here to try to clean our lives up. We are people coming here to worship the God who has saved us out of our mess. In our mess, He reached in and took us up out of that. We are worshiping that God. We are not here because we just need to clean some things up our life, check some boxes and get it done. No, we are here to worship because Jesus saved us apart from our efforts and apart from anything we need to do. And Peter just kind of laid it out. We are saved in the same way that they are.

Now, the question becomes how do we move from gospel clarity, a clear explicit gospel, to gospel unity in this decision. It's not enough for Peter to say this is true, deal with it, go figure it out. And there is this is debate about whether Acts descriptive of what went on, or prescriptive of what we should do. But I think, with all the details provided here, I think it's very clear that this is a model of what we should follow. And what we see here is a pastoral team of apostles and elders shepherding the people into unity on this truth. They are taking the gospel clarity and they are heading into finding unity in the gospel. That's what we see here. So Paul and Barnabas stand up and they explain all the miracles and signs and wonders. They're just saying, Look, this is what God's doing, He's saving the Gentiles, He is giving them the Spirit, and it's not because they've performed. They're just relaying what happened. Then James, the half brother of Jesus, stands up as one of the pastors over the church at this time, and concludes by appealing to the scripture. This is an important note. Pastor James turns to the scripture and quotes Amos 9. We see it here, starting at verse 16. "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the fallen tent of David; I will rebuild its ruins and restore it, so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord, namely, all the Gentiles I have called to be my own," says the Lord, who makes

these things known from long ago.” He stands up, he submits himself to the truth of the scriptures, and says, Look, this was always God’s plan. God was always going to save the Gentiles. Like, this should not catch you by surprise; this isn’t a new thing. The scriptures have testified to this, and we believe that. We then see in verse 19 and 20, he concludes “that we should not cause extra difficulty for those among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we should write them a letter telling them to abstain from things defiled by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood.”

So if you’re paying attention, you might notice that it seems like he threw some rules back on? The gentiles are saved by grace alone, apart from following the law, so tell them to follow a couple of these laws. But what we see here is that what he’s doing is shepherding his churches and the churches around in gospel unity. Abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, and what’s been strangled. These things from eating these things, these were common pagan practices in that day. They would have been an offense to the Jew. That’s why he says in verse 21, “For Moses has had those who proclaim him in every town from ancient times, because he is read aloud in the synagogues every Sabbath.” These things are always front and center. You do not fall into these pagan worship practices. That would have been offensive to the Jews, would have torn a rifts between the Jews and the Gentiles, as well as it would have muddied the water of the gospel clarity. If you’ve got a bunch of Christians running around and making pagan sacrifices, you can see how that would be confusing, right? That’s not the testimony you want for your congregation. So this warning in here is, Hey, now that you have been freed by the gospel, don’t cause the Jews to stumble; fight for unity. The fourth thing, sexual immorality, the fourth one, carries a lot of the same weight. There is absolutely a moral component to abstain from sexual immorality. But on top of that, in that day, it was very common for you to appease a pagan god by interacting with a pagan temple prostitute. Talk about muddying the waters of the gospel! If we see that in the community, if we see that going on in the church, that’s going to muddy the water. So he’s saying, Alright, listen, you have been set free from keeping the law. Fight for unity and godliness in your church. Let’s come together and fight for this. This is echoing I Corinthians 8:9, “But be careful that this liberty of yours does not become a stumbling block to the weak.” Just because you’re set free doesn’t mean you can be free to do whatever you want, but we need to continue to fight for unity. So even in their decree, we see this leadership team with an eye for unifying the church under the gospel with gospel clarity.

So look at what happens next, verse 22, “Then the apostles and elders—with the whole church—decided to send men chosen from among them, Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leaders among the brothers, to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.” So they’re going to take this letter and send it down. This is agreed upon by the apostles, the elders, and the whole church. You see them bringing the church into this decision. You see them bringing the church into this. We are in unity in what we’re saying here. Then we read what they wrote in the letter, it says that they unanimously decided to send these guys to deliver this letter. “We unanimously decided.” And then in 28, “it seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us not to place any greater burden on you than these necessary rules.” There is a unity in their midst that is only possible

through the Holy Spirit? I want to say this really carefully. Unity in the church is a direct result of the work of the Holy Spirit within the church as the church collaborates together. Unity is through the Spirit binding us together to collaborate together.

So your second observation is this: “The message of the gospel is preserved when the leadership and the people collaborate in submission to scripture.”

See, when a church comes together we can find a unity that is only possible through the Spirit of God around this central explicit gospel. So the church we see here is ordained by God as a means of protecting and preserving the gospel. This is why we need the church around us. This is why I need the church. It's so easy for you and me to fall into funky beliefs. You read one passage, and your mind starts to wander, and I come up with some idea that's not even close. I've had some weird views, and most of the time it's the church that God brings around me to correct me. At times I've had someone gently walk me through scripture, showing me what it says. And at times I've had someone come along side me and say Knock it off, that not what it says. But you know, whatever it is, I've seen time and time again that the church has been the one that has taken my eyes, pointed them back at the scripture, pointing me to this explicit clear gospel apart from works. This is why this lone wolf Christianity. I'm just good with me and my Bible and my cup of coffee – you guys have probably heard that before – that's why that's so dangerous. You're not meant to do this alone. We see here an example of the church coming around, unifying in a common goal. This is not possible if the church doesn't exist. I don't know how you can read the scripture and not see that you have submission of the church all the way through it. The book of Acts is a recording of this dispersion of the church from a couple of guys in the room to the ends of the earth, to all nations. It's about the explosion of the church. And then Paul is going around planting churches. There are entire books of the bible that center around instructing the leadership of churches. The biggest portion of our New Testament are letters written to churches. There is no room for “I don't think you really need church. I think that's optional.” The church is a means of God for bringing together His people for collaborating around a common goal. The message of the gospel is preserved because the church – the leadership and the people, the whole church – collaborating in submission to scripture.

So from here, they head down to the church in Jerusalem to deliver these letters, and then when they do they read them aloud and the people rejoice at what they hear. Which is expected. Like, Yes, we don't have this weight on us! Yes, we don't have to carry this burden! Yes, we don't have to be circumcised! Yes! We're good with that! They're excited, they're celebrating, and then a couple of the guys in verse 32, “encouraged and strengthened the brothers with a long speech.” I love that the Bible says that it's long. It's not “and they preached a sermon to encourage them.” No, it says that it's long. When the Bible says it's long, you know that brother was preaching! You've got to! They preached a long speech. Paul and Barnabas stay a while, they encourage and strengthen and teach. It says “they proclaimed the word of the Lord. They preached it out loud. Then they get this idea of Hey, this is great, we should go back and we should encourage and strengthen these churches we've planted on a missionary journey. Let's

go back and preach this word to them, encourage and strengthen them. And they're high-fiving, and doing their secret apostle handshake, and they're ready to go.

Then the subject of Mark comes up. So a couple of chapters earlier, Mark was a companion traveling with them, and all of a sudden in chapter 13 it just says that he just left them and returned to Jerusalem. It doesn't say much more about it there, but to Paul that's a big deal. He's calling him a deserter, he's saying, You abandoned us. He uses strong language. And it says that there was a "sharp disagreement." You can imagine what it's like to argue with Paul and Barnabas. You can bet that this was an adamant disagreement. So now there is a big disagreement as to whether or not it is wise to bring Mark with them on their journey. But what we're going to see once again is unity despite this disagreement, because there's no sense that this had to be hateful. There's nothing that makes me believe, other than the fact that this disagreement was sharp – and they really disagreed with each other – but there's no malice in this passage, there's no hate, there's no dislike. It just seems like both led by the Holy Spirit but arrive at very different conclusions for what to do with Mark. And we don't see hate even in the rest of scriptures. Paul writes warmly about Barnabas in 1 Corinthians. He greets Mark several times in other letters, and at the end of Colossians in chapter 4, he even sends greetings from him and Mark. He's with Mark. So this isn't like Paul is like one you're out, and no more. The argument is about is it wise to bring Mark at this time, and they arrived at different conclusions. Barnabas has the godly desire to give Mark another chance, to bring him with. Paul has the godly desire to say, Listen, I don't think it's good for him right now, I don't think it's a good idea because he deserted. It's still too fresh, just was just on his last missionary journey - I don't think it's the best decision right now. They disagree.

So what they do is they just kind of draw the line and they go their separate ways. Barnabas and Mark go down, sail away to Cyprus, and Paul heads down to Syria and Cilicia with Silas. They go their separate ways. And the question is, Where is the unity in this passage. Didn't they just split and go their separate ways? Where's the unity? I would argue that it's there. You see, though they parted ways, neither of them departed from the mission of God. If anything, their missionary efforts doubled. They go in two different directions. They both have departed on the mission of God, they're just not going side by side. What they think is wise is to split, but the mission of God is still going forward.

I had someone explain it to me this way: There are closed-handed issues and open-handed issues. We've got these closed-handed issues like what the church fought for up here. Is there something we need to do on top of believe in order to be saved? No. Closed-hand. That needs a ruling. Then there's open-handed, things you can give or take it. The wise thing for Mark? Depends who you ask. As the church today we have closed-handed issues: Is Jesus really God? That's closed-handed. Yes, we affirm that and if the leadership begins saying something different from stage, you'd turn and you'd leave! Right? So that's a closed-handed issue. But when's the best time to buy a building? What should that building look like? where should it be? what color carpet should it have? These are open-handed issues. I once had a

professor at Grace who always handled an open-handed issue by just shrugging and saying, I wouldn't split a church over it.

But really ask yourself, who won in this disagreement? If you consider the results, who won? God! God won! Right? Two people, brothers in the church on the same mission, both depart to take the explicit gospel, the pure gospel message of salvation by faith alone, to the ends of the earth. Even in this disagreement they did not break unity where it matters.

Which is the third observation. "The message of the gospel spreads when nonessential disagreements are set aside in order to proclaim Jesus' grace."

So first off, unity and uniformity are not the same thing. Unity is when we all have a common mission in the gospel. Uniformity is when we all believe the exact same things. One of these is possible, and one of these is not. We already established that. We will always have different preferences or different views on what wisdom looks like. We are not going to have uniformity on decisions on how ministry needs to be done, on what the mission of the church is going to look like, and how all the details play out. We are going to be all over the map in uniformity.

I have a friend of mine is a Tom Brady fan. He claims that Tom Brady is one of the best players, and for those of you who don't know he's this year's Super Bowl winning quarterback. But if you have 11 Tom Brady's out on the field at one time, you're not getting anything done. Right? He's not going to block, he is not fast. Uniformity is not the best thing for a unified team. Furthermore, wide receivers going different routes. Players have different roles. We need that kind of differentiation. This is the body analogy. We all have different gifts, different preferences, and different missions God has called our hearts into. We don't have uniformity. So there may be a departure. You're going to do kids' ministry and I'm going to go do evangelism. Same mission. We're going to serve in the way God has called us. Because "the message of the gospel is spread when nonessential disagreements are set aside to proclaim Jesus' grace."

Gospel clarity and gospel unity need to go hand-in-hand. The same mission that they gathered around here to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth is the same mission we are in. You have people in your life who have not heard the gospel. They have never heard this news. You have people in your life that think they know what the gospel is, and have never heard this news. And the call on us is to proclaim that. And we need everybody on this common mission. There is not one of us that can proclaim that message to the ends of the earth. More important than just one person preaching to you on a stage is you guys, as the church, as a congregation here, scattering throughout your everyday life—where you live, work, and play, proclaiming the gospel day after day. Anybody that's on that common mission with you, is your brother or sister, moving in the same direction, on the same mission. That's the unity we're looking for. Our unity is found when we gather around pure gospel, as God has revealed it in the scriptures. Our mission is to point them to the ends of the earth. That's the mission of Acts, this

dispersion of the message from a couple of guys in the room to the ends of the earth, to all nations.

So the PassageWay applied: “Proclaim salvation through faith alone, collaborating in submission to scripture, and set aside the nonessentials for the furthering of the gospel.”

We must see it as our role to fight for both Gospel clarity and Gospel unity. The pure, unaltered message of the Gospel is the ONLY means by which people can be saved. And we as a church must be willing to take a stand for Gospel clarity while at the same time overlooking open-handed issues, anything that doesn't derail the gospel call, the gospel mission. What does it look like for us to fight with unity? It looks like setting aside our preferences in order to find unity in the gospel alone. We must be marked as a people who unify around the explicit gospel.