

The Church in Biblical Perspective
The Presbyterian Church in America
“Biblical Challenges and Opportunities”

Acts 15

Dr. Harry L. Reeder III

July 4, 2021 • Sunday Morning Sermon

We will start by looking in Acts 15. The Gospel work has been happening as we now look at this passage in Acts 15. Acts 15:1–5 says [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.”*

The grass withers, the flower fades, God’s Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

It is good to be back from the General Assembly for the PCA that took place this past week. I hope you can enjoy this holiday as we consider how God providentially has blessed this nation through the work of the Gospel and through His church and what yet could be done. We have spent the past several weeks praying for and about the General Assembly because of some of the encroachments out of the evangelical church that is coming into and had begun to work their way over these last couple of years, worked their way into the PCA (Presbyterian Church in America), which made this 48th General Assembly and the issues it was facing even more profound.

Why is the General Assembly happening? I want to back up on this and I’ll start personally. In the early 1980s as I was graduating from seminary, I was working through in my heart where the Lord would lead me. I knew He was calling me full time into ministry but I wanted to know where in the ministry. There were a number of options before me at the time and one was an itinerant ministry that I was prayerfully considering. A second one was joining a para church group and then in God’s kind providence a number of things happened for me. One is that I began to meet some people that would take up a role in my life of challenging, encouraging and mentoring me. Some were Al Martin, Henry Krabbendam, Dr. Frank Barker, R.C. Sproul and then Jim Boyce. There were people that I was not only drawn theologically to them but I was drawn ecclesiastically church wise. Each one of them loved the Lord’s church and were churchmen. The church didn’t exist to give them a job. The church existed to the glory of God and they wanted to be invested in it. They all challenged me in that area and I sensed it and felt it.

Another providence that happened at that time when I was finishing up my seminary work, I began to do some focused work on the theology of the cross. As much as we preach and believe the virgin birth, rejoice in the resurrection, praise God for the Ascension and the Second Coming of Christ, the crux of Christianity is the cross. Cross comes from the work crux. When Paul wants to talk about the Gospel he will say ‘the word of the cross’ because at the cross the

holiness of God meets the love of God to save sinners by the grace of God to the glory of God. When I began to do the deep dive study in the cross it became obvious to me that in the Word of God when Jesus went to the cross, He did three things. One is He saved His people from their sins. Matthew 1:21 says [21] *She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus (Yeshua - salvation), for He will save His people from their sins.* Secondly, the Bible says Jesus has come into the world to defeat and destroy the works of the evil one (I John 3:8). At the cross, He bound the strong man (Mark 1:7), who can no longer stop the truth from going to the nations through his deception. Now we are free by the grace of God to go into all the world with the Gospel that came to the Jew first and then to the rest of the world. Thirdly, this passage came to me through the Holy Spirit from my wife from Ephesians 5:25 which says [25] *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.* In our American individualism, I think we lose this. Jesus not only went to the cross to save His people personally, but to save His church corporately. Jesus said “I will build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18) as Christ loves the church.

If I love Him, will I not love what He loves? If I rejoice in my redemption at the cross of His defeat of the evil one, death, hell and the grave, then will I not rejoice in His victory for His church that He ransomed and redeemed with His own blood? As Paul gave his life for the church at Ephesus and was there for three years to plant this church, knowing at the end of his ministry there he would be going back to Jerusalem to be arrested and put in prison, he gathers the elders together of the port city of Miletus and says to them in Acts 20:28, [28] *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained (purchased) with His own blood.* So out of my love to Christ, I’m an unabashed churchman for His church.

I love the church and it came home to me in a very special way. In a PCA church in 1981 in Miami, Florida, not yet ordained, but serving as a student pastor, I went to my first general assembly and remember reading and listening to all that was being said. Another man who made an impact on my life was there and as we stood there I said to him ‘I feel like this is almost a taste of the new heavens and the new earth.’ I had found a church where I could ecclesiastically embrace church government and I had already become convinced of it. It wasn’t hard for me because every time I looked in the Bible and saw the word church and the word elder which is plural, where the plurality of elders govern the church, not one man – it’s not a bishop system nor do the sheep just govern themselves – but the sheep elect for themselves according to the direction of God’s Word to watch over them, care for them, lead them and feed them. There is the local church overseen by the session and as I saw that I rejoiced in that, but more than that I had studied the Westminster standards. What a glorious distillation, although it’s not inerrant, but it is a glorious distillation of God’s inerrant truth. I was so drawn there. I heard the heart of this denomination’s desire to reach the world for Christ. Their mission statement is to be faithful to the Scriptures, true to the Reformed faith, obedient to the Great Commission and I turned to this friend of mine and said ‘I praise God I’m somewhere where there is a passionate evangelical thrust to reach the world for Christ yet an unabashed passionate commitment to the theology of truth.’ There’s breadth and depth here.

I had been in situations where there was no attention to doctrine and it would be five miles wide but only one inch deep. Then in reaction I would find myself with other brothers and they also were in reaction where the church was one inch wide and five miles deep. In one situation a man said ‘who here have we led to Christ?’ They had their truth lined up but no one was coming to Christ. I was not apart of a perfect church by any means but standing there at that

General Assembly, I just sensed with all of its imperfections, but principally not only was there a Biblical polity on church government but there was a commitment to the depth of the Reformation theology and a breadth of winning the world to Christ and for Christ by the grace of God to the glory of God. So I invested myself and as far as General Assemblies go by God's kind providence I've not missed a single one in 40 plus years. I have had the privilege to preach at seven of them and I have only spoken on the floor two times. I didn't even get a chance to speak this time even though I stood up three times to speak someone called the question so I try not to take it personally but I do think it was aimed that way. I'm unabashed about this.

I'm also fully aware that we are the Presbyterian Church *in* America so please pay close attention to the language. We are not of America for this is not America's church – this is Christ's church and we reside in this nation. That governs a lot that we do. For instance, when God allows us to do our mission to the world at Briarwood we have been able to do that at least two different times, where we have been part of planting an entire denomination in another nation. You will notice that they are not called the PCA in another country, like New Zealand, for they are called the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand. We plant local churches in localities and presbyteries in regions and General Assemblies in nations. Then from those nations those churches join us in sending Gospel missionaries around the world.

But the church of Jesus Christ needs to be shepherded. The church of Jesus Christ is the assembly of the saints of God and that happens in three ways. One is the local church in a locality where we assemble together, taking our covenant membership vows together to serve the Lord together in the Lord and for the Lord. This is overseen by elders. A presbytery is from a region where it is the gathering of the elders from churches in the region, such as the seven churches in the book of Revelation. These are local churches but as the seven, configured together as a circle around Christ in the middle, they are a church also regionally – a presbytery. Then there is the General Assembly and here in Acts 15 we read of the first General Assembly, in the 2100 year history of the church as it happens here in Jerusalem.

Theological issues have come up, specifically one of first order, in the church and they have to provide help to the presbyteries and the local churches. False teachers had gone out from Jerusalem and Judea to all the churches that had been planted in predominately Gentile areas. The teachers claimed to be credentialled from Jerusalem although you will see in a moment that they weren't, but these teachers told the Gentiles who had come to Christ and were baptized in the name of Christ that they first had to obey the ceremonial law of the Old Testament, specifically they had to be circumcised. These teachers told them according to what we just read in Acts 15 that they could not be saved if they were not circumcised. This is what we call legalism – this is why you tell someone that this is what they must do in order to be saved or stay saved or to let God save you.

There are two great errors to the Gospel. Think of the Gospel as the highway of life and there is a ditch on both sides. The ditch on one side is legalism – again this is when something is attached to a work that is necessary for God to save you. Christians do works but we don't do works to be saved for our works are the evidence of our salvation – not the ground of our salvation. Ephesians 2:8–9 says [8] *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* Even the faith we have is a gift from God. You can see how people would be tempted to convert this glorious Gospel of grace, as in saying something like 'if I'm not saved through my obedience to God's Word, then I can sin like I want and still have remission.' That's not true at all, because the Bible says if you are saved then the evidence will be your works and we see that

in the very next verse. Ephesians 2:10 says [10] *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, **that we should walk in them.***

So we say ‘no’ to libertinism and we say ‘no’ to legalism. We proclaim that Christ at the cross did the work of our salvation and now ascended works on those who are saved. Christ did the work for our redemption, now He is working on the redeemed and the evidence is changed lives to His glory. II Corinthians 5:17 says [17] *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.* You can’t get more basic in Christian doctrine than the Gospel. That’s why Paul said in I Corinthians 15:3–4, [3] *For I delivered to you as of **first importance** what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, [4] that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.* The first importance is the Gospel.

In these local churches in Acts 15 they were being disturbed about this so the apostles and the elders called a General Assembly, a convocation. The local churches were being overseen and shepherded by the elders. The churches were being overseen by the elders as they gathered regionally as a presbytery and now we see a General Assemble. Thus, we see Biblical polity through the governing of a plurality of presbyters. We see them handle the theological issues. So, what happened in that first General Assembly?

What happened at that first General Assembly is also what happened this last week in our General Assembly. They dealt with theological issues in an orderly yet passionate debate to determine, not what says the church, but what says the Scripture to the church. In Acts 15 we are kind of looking back at the records from the first General Assembly. So let’s look back at the Acts 15 text. Acts 15:5 says [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.”*

Don’t miss this. Where did this theological error come from? It didn’t come from wolves in sheep’s clothing, but from sheep, believers, who were wearing wolves clothing. One, the church is not so relationally crippled that they can’t go to one another as believers and say ‘you are wrong, I still love you and I’m not even doubting your motivation, but what you are teaching is wrong.’ We can’t let stand wrong doctrine and adulterate the Gospel. Secondly, when you are dealing with other people when they get something wrong, don’t assume they are out to destroy things. That’s where we are right now.

In the 19th century going into the 20th century, there were some professing “believers” who were convinced with the rise of modernity that the church was going to be put “on the dustbin of history.” They thought the church was going to be carried off into oblivion so they started a movement called liberal, “freer thinking,” Christianity. What was their motivation? It wasn’t to destroy the church but to what they thought would save the church from cultural irrelevance. Their mission was to transform the next century as the “Christian century” which was the language they used and they even started a magazine called the Christian Century. This Christian postmillennial utopia is what they wanted to usher in and all the mainline protestant denominations grabbed hold of their motivation thinking it would make the church relevant in our day as they would attempt to transform the culture with the church.

Motivation and mission always determine message. So then liberal Christianity gave birth to liberal theology, because as they looked at the modern mind, the modern mind won’t accept this holiness of God, this inerrancy of the Bible, the third day resurrection of Christ, a virgin birth, for they will laugh at us. So then from cultural relevance to cultural transformation the message became cultural magisterium, where the culture determined the message of the

church instead of Biblical magisterium. Sola Scriptura – the Scripture alone is our only rule of faith and practice. They then went through to vacuum out of the confession anything that was supernatural and offensive to the culture in cultural accommodation. In that day, did it rescue the church? No, it put mainline protestant Christianity on the real road of oblivion.

But, rising up was an evangelical church that said no to that and said ‘we’re going to be faithful’ but in the late 20th century cut from the same bolt of cloth as liberal Christianity comes progressive Christianity. It has the same mantra to save the church for the next generation for we’re going to lose all of our children if we keep believing these things – things like a God who requires us to believe the death of His Son will save us from sin. We can’t solve the issues of today – racism, sex trafficking, this, that and the other – with that out moted message. We have to get up to date they say. Progressive Christianity was also going to save the church from irrelevance and was going to cause human flourishing in the 21st century. They say they will raise up the city, take it forward and take humanity forward through cultural transformation. Result? Just like liberal Christianity produced liberal theology, progressive Christianity with the wrong motivation and wrong mission has produced progressive theology that strikes at the Gospel.

In progressive Christianity issues such as sexually addicted sins can be forgiven but not necessarily transformed, for you just have to manage the sin. The desire is not sin, it’s just of sin but not sin. The very vitals of the Gospel are being attacked again but this time, not with legalism, but with libertinism and with a loss of hope. The issues of discrimination and prejudice that are issues of the heart are dealt with through just changing the sociology of the culture, the politics of the culture where you make the oppressors the oppressed and the oppressed the oppressors. There is no restitution, reconciliation, redemption or repentance. It’s just penance, hatred, division and polarization. Progressive Christianity opens the door for the social, political and economic tools of the age, in place of the life changing Gospel which makes you right before God and sets you free from the power of sin so you can begin to grow in the power, grace and knowledge of God. It strikes at the heart.

I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet but evangelical Christianity, if it continues to allow progressive Christianity in its pulpits, its seminaries and its churches, then evangelical churches in the next 20 years will be just as empty as the mainline protestant churches are. It has even found its way into the PCA over these last couple of years. We said this General Assembly is going to be crucial and it was. It’s very hard for me not to get emotional right now but I thank God for the hundreds of people last week that were back here praying, along with thousands of others around the world in the Presbyterian Church. I thank God for our elders who I have the enormous privilege to serve with and under and the pastoral staff whom I serve alongside with.

I praise God that in this last week I saw something happen that I never thought would happen. I am not a pessimistic person; I just did not think the substance and scope of what I saw happen with the overtures that were approved would happen. I will be giving a fuller report later for we have not won a war on this thing. In the evangelical church for sure and even in our own denomination, the very things that were passed gloriously and resoundingly, now have to go through presbyteries. All of that has yet to be done but what happened last week was like D-Day – the beach was taken, the cliffs were taken, but now hedgerow by hedgerow and village by village have to be taken in the coming months and years. Error and the doctrines of demons can get in quickly and deeply and it’s not just wolves, it’s sheep who hear the terms (same vocabulary) and think they have the same dictionary but they don’t. They see the issues and want them to be dealt with so they are willing to give things an ear, then sometimes the things

you have listened to need to be jettisoned but they have substance and traction and have to be dug out by prayer, love and patience, with iron sharpening iron. Yet I never expected to be where I am today on these issues. God was so gracious and I give Him praise and thanksgiving, grateful to all who prayed and all who were engaged. God gave some glorious victories.

So, what does that look like? Let's look back at what happened at this first General Assembly in Acts. This is actually what happened last week at our General Assembly. Acts 15:6–11 says *[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 (not by circumcision). [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."*

In Acts 15:7 Peter is referring to the Great Commission and how in Acts 1 the Gospel would moving from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the rest of the world and we see that progression of the Gospel through the book of Acts. The very first Gentiles were brought into the Kingdom through Peter and his ministry, which was the centurion and his family at Caesarea by the Sea. This affirmed that God was not only saving the Jewish ethnicity but also the Gentiles from all the nations. It matters not whether Jew or Gentile for we're saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Then what happens? Also, remember James is the pastor at the church in Jerusalem.

Acts 15:12–21 says *[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 (referring to Peter) 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 (saved remnant) 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."

James basically says after Peter, Barnabas and Paul have spoken, that they are not going to believe the Gospel truth simply because of the anecdotal evidences of Peter, Paul and Barnabas, but we believe it because these are anecdotal evidences of what God's Word says. Then James appeals to the Scripture that God will save for Himself in the New Covenant a people from the Jews and the Gentiles as he quotes from the Old Testament. It is not anecdotal evidence that establishes doctrine, it's God's Word that establishes it and that's what won the day in that General Assembly. Then they give pastoral advice as to how they are to live their Christian life, how to honor the Lord and do effective Jewish evangelism because there are Jewish people in every city. Now what happens at this Assembly?

Acts 15:22–29 says [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.”*

In other words, the General Assembly reported out their decisions on affirming the Gospel truth and then sent it out. That’s what I’m doing today. I’m giving you a preliminary report of what happened last week at our General Assembly. We’ll also do a written report. So all the churches hear the report from the commissioners who had been sent to the General Assembly here in Acts through a written report/letter. These men can be trusted – Barnabas and Paul. It’s interesting to note that even here and at General Assembly after General Assembly the issue of Biblical sexuality always has to be dealt with, all the way to our generation. We can’t impact the culture unless we address these issues of Biblical sexuality upon ourselves that we are conforming for God’s glory to His Word in these matters. These matters have been addressed for 2100 years because Satan does not stop his imitation, infiltration and intimidation. Let’s continue in the text.

Acts 15:30–35 says [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] Notwithstanding it pleased Silas to abide there. [35] But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.* They come back to the local church to deliver the contents of the General Assembly. Then they resumed the life of the local church to get the business of the Lord done as they would serve the Lord with all of their heart. So here is the takeaway.

The takeaway is by God’s grace and for His glory a great commitment to fulfill the Great Commission and embrace the Great Commandment. Where do we go from here? Let’s get back to business. We have to carry through these overtures and bring them into the life and ministry of the PCA. In the meantime, let’s have a great commitment to do the Great Commission and embrace the Great Commandment. Think of a culture in a church where the people there build a culture, not on the basis of our cultural preferences, but on the Word of God – to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul and mind and then to love our neighbor as ourself. We are men and women made in the image of God – having no distinctions ethnically, racially, economically, socially, regionally but we’re one in Christ. In Christ, we are neither Jew nor Gentile but we build that culture where they marvel at how we love one another that proclaims

the integrity, when we tell those who are not yet in Christ that we want them to come to Christ because we love them.

What would that look like? It would look like a church that is seeking to be God-glorifying, Christ-exalting, Spirit-filled, Bible preaching, disciple making. It would be a church that loves the exaltation ministry of worship on the Lord's Day and that every day is evangelizing. My five Es – everybody evangelizing everywhere everyday everyone. It would be a church that enfolds believers and their households into a Great Commandment culture of loving one another with truth, love, clarity and charity. It would look like an equipping church where people are in small groups being discipled. Edmund Burke calls it the 'little platoons.' I love to see people meeting 3 or 4 at a time out at a restaurant – couples, singles, all gathering together. They are seeing the work of the Lord being done and they are apart of the work of the Lord being done.

What does Paul do? He says to Barnabas, "let's go do it again." Then they go on a second missionary journey. So I would say to you today 'Let's do it again.' Join us, into the PCA and from the PCA to our nation and our nation to the world – great commitment to fulfill the Great Commission and embrace the Great Commandment. I love to go to a place two blocks from where George Whitfield stood and preached – because right where I like to stand is where Benjamin Franklin stood. Franklin said as he listened to Whitfield preach 'It looks like the whole world is going to church.' I would have loved to have tapped him on the shoulder and said 'It looks that way because the whole church loves Jesus and is going to the world to win them to Christ.' Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. If you are reading this today and you heard that Jesus died on the cross for your sins, you know you're a sinner and you want to come to Christ, I invite you to call us here at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200 for we would love to pray confidentially with you. Then Father I pray for Your people. I thank You again for these elders, deacons and the many who prayed so hard for this last week's General Assembly, and You did beyond what we could imagine or think. The scope and the substance were overwhelming. Help us not to rest on laurels but to move about, not only in our denomination but into this world with a great commitment with the Great Commission and live the Great Commandment on mission, on message, and in the ministry of truth and love, for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

CHRIST'S CHURCH IN AMERICA

Today's Situation

God's Solution

LIFE TAKEAWAY

By God's grace and for His glory...

A Great Commitment to fulfill the Great Commission and embrace the Great Commandment.

Exaltation – Evangelism – Enfolding – Equipping