

Rolling Our Own: What Is Grace?

Acts 15:1-11

It's not the most elegant of metaphors. Remember the old cowboy movies of cowboys rolling their own cigarettes? But it makes the point. As a Baptist local church, we have the holy freedom and responsibility to shape our life as a congregation, our identity and our mission in Christ—and that for better and for worse.

We've looked at three questions: What Is Baptist? What is Church? What is Ecumenical, and now today, What is Grace? How are we Baptist? How are we Church? How are we Ecumenical?

Today I launch a series of worship services designed for congregational discussion in the services themselves. Each week, I'll set the stage, then toss the football to you. We will do so through the Season of Grace.

When we were formed a little over 50 years ago, the local Baptist Association opposed our forming a new church, "We don't need another Baptist church in town", they said. And we said, "We're going to be a different kind of Baptist church." We didn't know at the time how different! A church is a living

organism always in the process of becoming. A 50th anniversary is a good time to reflect on what we have become and what we are still becoming.

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Our text for today is an important episode in the life of the early church as they struggled to figure out who they were as a branch of first century Judaism. The painful divorce between the synagogue and the church hadn't happened yet.

The issue was how much of the Mosaic law a person had to follow in order to become a part of the Jesus movement within Judaism. The pivotal issue that brought them all together was circumcision. Did a Gentile convert to the way of Jesus have to be circumcised?

There were two camps. There was the conservative camp based in Jerusalem led by James the brother of Jesus, and there was the liberal camp, centered in Antioch led by Peter and Paul.

Within the conservative camp there was an ultra-traditional group led by Pharisees who had decided to follow Jesus. They argued that one not only had to follow all the 613 commands of the Mosaic teaching but had to be circumcised. Circumcision was the identifying mark—a rather male-centric mark!

The liberal camp had been out preaching the gospel to Gentiles, and lo and behold, the Holy Spirit began falling on Gentiles even before they were baptized! The Spirit has a way of getting ahead of the church!

Peter stood and spoke about the miracle happenings among the Gentiles. They didn't need bodily circumcision; the Spirit had circumcised their hearts. He concluded with this flourish of words:

“We believe we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ!”

When we formed we named ourselves Grace. I don't know the process of our deciding our name, but it fits the kind of God we believe in. Our Call to Gathering gathers some of these descriptions of who God is. A God full of mercy and abounding in steadfast love. And our salvation comes by grace!

Frederick Buechner writing about grace, said:

Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There is no way to earn it or deserve it... A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's nothing *you* have to do.

There's nothing you *have* to do. There's nothing you have to *do*.¹

We've sung Amazing Grace a thousand times hoping its truth will sink in and we let grace in. I like our name: Grace Baptist Church

Now here we are, Grace Baptist 2022, 52 years after our founding in 1970. In our last Covenant revision in 2015 we thought hard about the kinds of issues the Council in Jerusalem struggled with. Just replace circumcision with baptism. How inclusive will we be? How open to what God is doing? In the Covenant we invite all to join without a requirement as to a certain kind of belief in order to join us, only a desire to do so.

Section Two of the covenant, “Our Mission” is a beautiful and apt description of who we are. It’s reprinted every week on the back of our bulletin. Take a look.

We are Grace – a ministering people of God, reaching beyond our walls to the needs of our local and global community. We are an intergenerational faith community called and committed to a life of love and servanthood through the experience of celebrative worship, the development of each person’s gifts and the work for peace and justice. In our diversity we find strength and a way to understand the inclusiveness of God. We recognize each individual as a child of God. We welcome and affirm ALL people, who and where you are, to join in our common mission through participation and leadership in this community of faith.

And below it, we note our affiliations: The Alliance of Baptist, the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America and Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists.

If we were to re-write “Our Mission” today seven years later, would we say it any differently, add anything?

How are we Baptist, how are we Church? How are we Ecumenical? How do we blend these together here?

I toss the football to you. Let the conversations begin.

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (N.Y.: Harper&Row,1973),33-4