

Bible Study Notes: 2-21 & 28-2024

THE BOOK OF ACTS *Acts 13-15*

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Paul's First Missionary Journey (13-14)

The Sending Church

At the beginning of our lesson (13:1-3), Luke makes it clear that the basis of Christian outreach is the local congregation of believers. As a matter of fact, the book of Acts knows nothing of personal evangelism or church growth separately from the fellowship within the church. And behind every individual witnessing outreach is the presence of a praying and supporting group. The church at Antioch was such a church. Luke writes, ***“As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, ‘Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away’”*** (13:2-3).

We want to take a close look at the character of those Antioch Christians and the qualities of the church that sponsored the first missionary efforts of Paul and Barnabas.

First, the church was made up of a trustworthy congregation of believers. Remember, Antioch of Syria was a bustling, pagan metropolitan area, but it was here that the title “Christians” was given to followers of Christ. The genuineness of their faith and life showed that they had been with Jesus. It is amazing how connected our witness and our characters are. To have power, our witness must be trustworthy.

A second quality that distinguished the Antioch church was its diverse congregation. The believers were involved with a diversity/variety of ministries. Two ministries are mentioned especially in verse 1: prophecy and teaching. Teachers were involved in training and nurturing their fellow Christians in the churches. On the other hand, the prophets traveled across the countryside preaching God’s Word and seeking converts. It was this diversity of gifts and abilities that enabled them to be effective Christians.

We notice also that they were racially diverse. Five individuals who were apparently in leadership positions are mentioned (13:1). Simeon called Niger was probably black and from Africa, and Lucius was from Cyrene, also in Africa. Saul was, of

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course, a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, and Barnabas was a Jew from Cyprus. It seems that from this brief mention that neither race nor geographical location was a barrier to inclusion in the church of Antioch.

We know, too, that the church was socially diverse. It seems likely that Barnabas and Simeon were not individuals of high social standing. On the other hand, Manaen apparently had connections in high social and political circles because of Luke's careful mention of his connection with Herod. And we have every reason to believe that Paul's family was evidently prominent in Tarsus. Just this brief mention would seem to indicate both a socially diverse and a socially inclusive congregation. The Christians in Antioch had their priorities straight—they weren't going out to establish churches with any particular kind of social ranking. Their vision was to expand the body of Christ.

And finally, we know that the Antioch church had a worshipful congregation (13:2-3). They fasted and prayed, and it was in this attitude of worship that the Lord was able to speak to them about Barnabas and Paul. We know, also, that at Antioch worship was not hurried, for Luke says, "*they ministered to the Lord.*" The word *ministered* in Greek expresses acts of devoted service. In other words, when they worshipped God, they offered themselves completely to Him. Worship was not a passive act for them; it required instead an active involvement.

This brings us now to the fourth quality that distinguished the church at Antioch. They were a responsive group of Christians. Paul and Barnabas had been central figures in the founding of the church. But they did not identify the life of their church with any person or group. They were not locked into any persons for success. This gave them the freedom to openly respond to God's voice when He spoke to them.

There is so much for us to reflect upon in the opening three verses of this lesson, and we can learn a great deal from these first-century Syrian Christians. They have given us a model of integrity in words and actions, a pattern for unity in diversity, and an awareness of the vitality of worship.

Following their commissioning by the Antioch Christians, Paul and Barnabas, along with young John Mark, took a ship at Seleucia, the seaport of Antioch, and sailed to Cyprus, Barnabas's homeland. Their first stop was at the port city of Salamis. After delivering their message of Good News there, they traveled west across the rugged country to Paphos. Here, two interesting characters enter the scene: Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul/governor, and a magician named Elymus (13:5-12).

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As the drama unfolds, it becomes obvious that Sergius Paulus was open to the gospel message, even though Paphos, as a city, was devoted to the worship of Venus. But Elymas, the magician, attempted to divert the governor's interest. He knew that if Sergius Paulus became a Christian, his influence as a magician sorcerer would be over. Out of the many things that happened on Cyprus, Luke chooses to highlight this event. We can only speculate that he wanted to build a case against the evil and destructive deception involved in the kind of magic Elymus practiced.

Elymas practiced a evil kind of magic and fortune-telling, one that perverted ***“the right ways of the Lord” (13:10)***. Elymas had Sergius Paulus “under his spell,” and anything that would remove that spell was a threat. Luke tells us Paul was equal to the test and, inspired by the Holy Spirit, publicly disciplined Elymas and declared that he would be blind for a time (13:10-11). When Sergius Paulus saw the power of the Holy Spirit acting through Paul, he became a believer in Jesus Christ.

We live in a time of wonders. If our great-great-grand parents could visit our world today, they would think they had stepped into a magic kingdom—satellite television, world wide web, space travel and organ transplants. In the wonders of modern life there is the subtle temptation to give in to the illusion of being our own gods. But the message of Paul and Barnabas and John Mark on Cyprus a little over 1900 years ago, that only through Jesus Christ do we find reality and meaning, is our up-to-date answer for today.

Beyond Tradition

The move beyond tradition, which we will consider now, transcends the limits of religion. This section of Acts (13:13-52) pictures how difficult that is. Just as Elymas opposed the move beyond magic, the Jews in Pisidian Antioch opposed the move beyond tradition.

When their mission in Paphos on Cyprus was completed, the three travelers sailed to Perga, located on the coast of Asia Minor. It was here that John Mark abruptly left Paul and Barnabas and headed for home. We don't know what went wrong, but we do know there was ill feeling because of what happened at the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey.

The scene in Antioch opens with Paul and Barnabas in the synagogue, where, after the reading of the Scriptures, they were invited to speak. The scene continues then to the next Sabbath day when crowds gathered in huge numbers to hear Paul again, and the Jewish leaders became envious of their popularity. We see in this part of our lesson that the move beyond tradition is first from within (13:13-46). In the major

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part of this section Luke gives us Paul's address that first Sabbath day in the synagogue. Here we have a great example of his preaching.

In the sermon we see how Paul attempts to move his listeners beyond their tradition from within it. He traces how God had "moved" the Jews along from the time of their being chosen by God as His special people, throughout their 400 years of slavery and oppression in Egypt, their exodus and years in the wilderness, to their entry into the Promised Land. He then shows how God had "moved" them from being led by judges and prophets to being ruled by kings. And he climaxes his sermon by indicating that King David himself pointed to the coming of Jesus Christ. Paul had given them an excellent lesson on their religious roots, and it was well received.

Such reviews of our faith are helpful and even necessary. This is why so many of the teachings and sermons found in our Bible include the recounting of past events. A "memory" of the past is necessary to understanding both the present and the future. As we "connect" with our traditions, we are given a sense of continuity with the actions of God in times past. And at the same time, we are better able to understand the present implications of our tradition.

Paul's message was clear that day in the synagogue. Everything within the tradition of his listeners focused on the coming of Jesus Christ and concluded in His death and resurrection. We find a close similarity between Paul's sermon here and that of Peter's on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The challenge is to build on the past, acknowledge that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of their history and move ahead into the future under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

We come now to that second Sabbath day in Antioch. While large crowds gathered to hear Paul, the Jewish leaders, envious of his popularity, began to spread dissension and accused him of wickedness. It was then that Paul dropped a bombshell with the word that the move beyond tradition is not only from within, but from without (13:46-52). They had to believe that God was just as willing to offer Christ to the gentile as to the Jews. And Paul made it clear that their instructions from the Lord were to be a ***"light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth"*** (13:47). When the gentiles in the crowd heard this, they were delighted and many believed, but the Jews were angry and pressed the crowd to opposition and persecution.

The move from without in this case called for the Jew to accept the gentile. It leads us to a spirit of mutual love and cooperation with our Christian brothers and sisters

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who are a part of traditions that differ from ours. Later Paul expressed it well when he wrote, ***“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus”*** (Gal. 3:28). The gospel flame had been lit. It had spread from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. Now, it had cut a path into the heart of Asia Minor—Pisidian Antioch in what is now central Turkey.

Beyond Praise and Persecution

When Paul and Barnabas moved out on this first missionary journey, they had no idea what the response to their efforts would be. They knew what we know—there are no guarantees. Chapter 14 of Acts shows us that we must move beyond a dependence on praise or fear of persecution in our life and service for God.

When Paul and Barnabas left Antioch, they traveled southeast about ninety miles on the Roman road to the ancient city of Iconium. Here as before, the two missionaries boldly proclaimed the message of salvation (14:1), and while many believed, those who did not, set out to make trouble. Paul and Barnabas stood firm, and it is thought that they stayed on in Iconium for the entire winter.

Remaining in Iconium despite opposition and persecution was necessary for the confirmation of the new believers. Paul and Barnabas knew that the new Christians were far from established in their faith. Had they not stuck by them, they might have been lost to the opposition. This is an important truth for us to remember in our own experience. Our task is not only to point others to Christ, but also to stand by and be with them as they move toward maturity.

As Christianity moved into this arena of opposition, it was forced to interact with the long-standing philosophical, religious, and political value systems. Only those who were prepared to become engaged in dialogue with those systems could ever hope to sway men and women from them. This is why it is important that we don't isolate ourselves from society and culture if our witness is to be understood and have credibility.

Paul and Barnabas were well-suited for their task. Paul's background and training both in Tarshish and in Jerusalem had prepared him for dialogue with the intellectuals in the Greek and Roman world. His early training served him well as a Christian communicator. And we learn from this the importance of our being well trained for our role of living out our Christian faith in the complex world of today. Competent, trained ministers and lay persons are necessary to the movement of the Good News into our world. This is why the kind of Bible study we are involved in here is

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so important—as we know and understand our faith, we become better witnesses for the Lord.

But, finally, the opposition in Iconium became too strong. The mobs got violent and threatened a lynching, so Paul and Barnabas traveled from Iconium to Lystra, about a six-hour trip. Luke then explains that they preached the gospel there, in nearby Derbe and the surrounding area. It was here that Paul and Barnabas confronted a different kind of problem (14:8-18). And in this episode, we learn that the base for our service to the Lord is not in order to receive praise.

When Paul healed the man in Lystra who had been crippled since birth, he unleashed a wave of emotion that soon got out of hand. The people of Lystra were submerged in Roman and Greek mythology, and they immediately interpreted the healing as being done by Jupiter and Mercurius, or Zeus and Hermes in Greek teachings (14:12). And Luke then tells us that the priest of Jupiter made preparation to offer sacrifices to them (14:13). It is important that Paul and Barnabas stood as firmly against this false praise as they had against the strong persecution in Iconium.

Paul's reaction to what had happened is interesting. Luke writes that he and Barnabas tore their clothes and ran around among the people, shouting, ***“We also are men of like passions with you” (14:15)***. They tried to show their humanity. Their confidence in the gospel was so great that they knew this exposure of their humanness would not take away from it.

Paul and Barnabas actions here remind us that real people are Christ's best witnesses. The Incarnation of Jesus reminds us that humanity is an acceptable “package” for transmitting the gospel message. And when we realize that, we are free to do what Paul and Barnabas did—concentrate on the message, not on ourselves (14:15-17).

And it is the message that Jesus Christ came to give us New Life that counts. It is not the personality or the looks of the messenger that makes the difference. Religious sideshows are not the vehicle for relieving the hurts of people. There is no need to complicate the message. It is as simple now as it was in the first century: ***“But as many received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name” (John 1:12)***.

The good soon became not so good. Some Jews from Antioch and Iconium had possibly heard about what was happening in Lystra. Rushing there, they were successful in turning the people against Paul. Their former adoration turned to hate. They stoned Paul and left him for dead. But Luke tells us he was not dead, and when he revived,

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he went right back into the city and spent the night there before going on to Derbe (14:20).

After preaching and witnessing in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas then retraced their steps—going first to Lystra, then to Iconium and Antioch. At each stage of the trip they affirmed and encouraged the new Christians who had found the Lord during the missionaries' earlier visit. Finally, they moved to Perga and then over to Attalia where they took a ship back to Antioch in Syria.

The time involved in this first missionary journey is an estimated three years. The gospel of Jesus had now moved into several Roman settlements in Asia Minor in its march toward the city itself. And throughout the entire trip Paul and Barnabas had remained faithful to their calling in spite of both persecution and unnecessary praise. They had risked much as they pursued new converts and nurtured new Christians. The cost had been high, but as a theologian expressed it, "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die."

The Jerusalem Council (15:1-35)

When Paul and Barnabas returned to the church in Antioch, Syria, they found it in turmoil. A group of Jewish Christians had arrived there from Judea and had declared, "***Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved***" (15:1). In other words, the gentile Christians had to become Jews, or they could not be saved. Obviously, these Jerusalem Jews were among those who viewed Christianity as nothing more than a Jewish division. Old ways of thinking and believing die hard, for sure, some beliefs had not died at all.

So, with the success of their first missionary tour just barely behind them, Paul and Barnabas and the rest of the Christians in Antioch had to wrestle with their most critical problem yet. When the issue could not be settled locally, it was "***determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain others of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question***" (15:2). The question was critical: Was the gospel for a few Jews or was it for everyone?

And so we have the setting for what has since been referred to as the First Church Council or the Apostolic Council, which met in Jerusalem in A.D. 49.

The Council in Session

The apostles and elders gathered in a formal meeting. Of primary importance is that they started off by allowing a full airing of opinion. Earlier Paul and Barnabas had given a full report on their trip and on the dispute in Antioch. Then Peter, having

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learned his lesson well in Jopps and Caesarea, argued against the attempt to Judaize the gentile Christians (15:7-11). Next Paul and Barnabas spoke to the assembly, ***“declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them”*** (15:12).

There seems to have been no limit placed on the debate. No viewpoint was given preference over another during the discussion. Also, no assumption about right and wrong were made ahead of time. All involved were Christians, and everyone was given the opportunity to speak his mind. The atmosphere was electric because of the importance of the issue.

Following the discussion, the group looked to trusted leaders to bring insight. Then after Peter and Paul and Barnabas were heard, James, the acknowledged leader of the church in Jerusalem, spoke (15:13-21). The atmosphere was one of quiet and respectful attentiveness.

As James spoke, it became clear that the Scriptures were the final court of appeal. Even though the witness of the respected apostles seemed conclusive, no decision was made without confirmation from the Old Testament. The prophecy of Amos (9:11-12) served as the final voice. Through it the prophet spoke of the restoration of Israel but did so not in terms of the Jews alone, but also of the gentiles.

In this meeting, first, all opinions were heard. Then came the viewpoint of the mature leaders, and under the guidance of James the authority of the Scriptures was stated. The gentile Christians would not be required to take on the traditions of Judaism. But in order to make it possible for Jew and gentile to experience fellowship together without social strain, the gentiles were asked to avoid idol contamination of any kind, to not practice fornication, and to eat nothing that had been strangled and from which the blood had not been drained (in other words, their meat was to be prepared according to Jewish custom). By following these simple and reasonable rules, Jew and gentile Christians could associate together without offending each other.

Antioch Christians Reassured

Now we come to the final act in the Church Council drama. The decision was clearly communicated (15:22-31). It was to be written down carefully and entrusted to Judas and Silas, who were to accompany Paul and Barnabas and deliver it in person to the Christians in Syrian Antioch. The key words here, I believe, are ***“. . .it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us. . .”*** (15:28). Here we see the coming together of divine and human wills. That alone could have produced the spirit of ***“one accord”*** (15:25), which eventually came to characterize the Jerusalem conference.

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Behind all of this is the an unspoken but important fact—there is no mention that anyone was excommunicated from the fellowship. People on both sides of the dispute still appeared to be in the church after the smoke had cleared away. This in itself is a powerful testimony, especially when so many of our disputes today end in division, hard feelings, and losers leaving the church. Too often we start with division and end with breakup, but they started with division and ended with unity. We forget too easily that the purpose of decision-making is to strengthen the unity of the church. The early Christians seem to have kept the desire for unity uppermost in the whole process. The final result was a general spirit of encouragement and a spirit of revival (15:31-35).

A full circle has occurred in this lesson. We started in Antioch in Syria, and we end there. The church that had the qualities necessary to be a sending church was also the church that had the qualities to receive and connect a critical decision. The Christian faith was the repeated call of God to “move beyond” these things that would have continually hindered the Christians.

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