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Paul's First Journey and the Apostolic Council Acts 13:1 - 16:5

I. Introduction to the Book of Acts - Part Two: Christian Mission to the Gentiles

In this lesson we survey the second half of the Acts of the Apostles, that section which runs from the closing verses of Acts 12 through the end of the book and focuses primarily on the ministry of the apostle Paul, whom God in Christ had commissioned to be the apostle, par excellence, we might say, to the Gentiles. Acts 13-28 may be subdivided into three sections, just as in our last lesson we saw we could subdivide the first half of it into three main sections, each ending with one of Luke's summary statements that reflects a certain geographical progression in the ministry of the first Christians.

II. Paul's First Journey and the Apostolic Council

The first of these spans Acts 12:25-16:5, and deals with Paul's first missionary journey and the apostolic council in Jerusalem that ensued in a large measure as a result of Paul's teaching and the controversy that it generated. Paul sets out with Barnabas, the older Christian in the faith who had first encouraged him and nurtured him in the Lord, as well as Mark (John Mark), the author of the gospel which bears his name. They begin from their home base (for their missionary work) of Antioch in Syria, the first Christian missionary headquarters we might think of it as. Antioch was the place where believers were first called Christians and, as we saw very briefly at the end of our last lesson, the first recorded example, at least, of a church which was predominantly Gentile in background. It is very appropriate, therefore, that the expansion of Christianity into all the Gentile world, into the far-flung parts of the Roman Empire—what Jesus Himself called the “uttermost parts of the earth”—should proceed from this location.

A. Island of Cyprus

Sergius Paulus

Paul

Elymas



As Paul and Barnabas and Mark set out, their first major port of call is the island of Cyprus, the location from which Barnabas himself had come. The primary incident that we are told about in this portion of Acts 13 is Paul's encounter with the Jewish magician known alternately as Elymas or Bar-Jesus. Much like Jesus' exorcism of the Gadarene demoniac, an instance in which a certain measure of destruction or evil had to take place to overcome stronger occult powers; namely Elymas is blinded for a time. The governor, the proconsul of the island of Cyprus (Sergius Paulus), is so impressed by this miraculous display of power combined with the preaching of the Christian missionaries there that he comes to faith. This illustrates the principle that we will see elsewhere throughout the book of Acts in the New Testament: namely, that the leaders of households or even of entire cities or nations are often targeted, particularly in a patriarchal culture where there would have been a great spin-off of evangelistic success with those who respected and looked up to these particular leaders—an approach that is perhaps emulated in cultures that have similar dynamics as well today.

B. Province of Galatia

From Cyprus the little band of Christian missionaries traveled to the mainland of what today we would call Turkey, and then head northward and up into the mountainous plateau of the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia, stopping at such cities as Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Presumably these cities are in view when Paul will later pen his epistle to the Galatians. When Paul finds a significant Jewish community, as in the city of Pisidian Antioch, he preaches a sermon that is very reminiscent of the type of first Christian preaching we heard from Peter in the early chapters of Acts. When he comes, in chapter 14, to a city like Lystra, which apparently has no significant Jewish presence but a very superstitious pagan people thinking that Paul and Barnabas are the Greek or Roman gods Zeus and Hermes (head of the pantheon and messenger-god), then the undoubtedly abbreviated form or digest of Paul's message that Luke records takes a very different perspective. Gone are quotations of Old Testament passages or apologetics showing how Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah.

Acts 14:15

Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.



Acts 15:1-2a

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.

But still followed are the principles of establishing common ground with the people, speaking to their felt needs, appealing to revelation (general revelation in nature in this case rather than the special revelation of the Hebrew Scriptures), in order to lead up to a testimony about the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is interesting to watch the strong sway of opinion in several of these towns in southern Galatia, where initial reception—even almost worship—of these individuals as gods turns, in part due to Jewish provocation, to attempts to kill Paul—in one instance, stoning him and leaving him for dead, even though it turns out he was able to recover and to continue on. The first missionary journey of Paul is the shortest of his missionary journeys.

C. Apostolic Council in Jerusalem

Undoubtedly after the physical as well as emotional rigors of this enterprise, he returns to the home base of Antioch and also goes up to Jerusalem. Even what little evangelism he has done thus far has gotten back to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem and others, including non-Christian Jews in the area who are increasingly disturbed about the reports they hear that Paul is preaching to the Gentiles a law-free Gospel. Specifically, the charge that is brought in the opening verses of Acts 15 is that he is not requiring Gentiles who come to Christ to undergo the Jewish ritual of circumcision (a practice which law-abiding Jews regularly believed was a necessary part of God’s covenant with His people). It is not surprising then that these “Judaizers,” as Paul would call them in his letter to the Galatians, were insisting that one must be circumcised to be saved, even if one was a Gentile and therefore not circumcised as a child, according to Gentile traditions.

This required no small congress, but has often been called an apostolic council or the Jerusalem council, with which the majority of Acts 15 is occupied. Here representatives of the Jerusalem church, with James as its chief elder, the initial twelve apostles with Peter as the spokesman, and Paul and Barnabas themselves each take turns reporting their understanding of what God has been doing in their midst. Fortunately for the sake of the survival of the fledgling Christian church, they come to an agreed-upon conclusion that what Paul has been doing is basically correct. One need

Four Issues of the Jerusalem Council:

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1. Eating meat with blood
 2. Eating meat of strangled animals
 3. Eating food sacrificed to idols
 4. Fornication or sexual immorality

Paul's Second and Third Journey

Acts 16:6-19:20

not impose circumcision or any other part of the Jewish law as a mandated, necessary requirement for salvation.

The letter that is penned and sent to the churches where these controversies first developed nevertheless concludes with four commands, although that term may be a bit strong because Luke simply says that they said, "If you do these things you will do well." But there are four issues in which Christians, particularly Gentile Christians, are strongly encouraged not to offend fellow Jews—Christian or otherwise. These issues are eating meat with its blood still in it, eating the meat that comes from strangled animals, eating food that has been sacrificed to idols, and fornication or sexual immorality. This seems to be a strange cluster of commands, although all seem to be tied in somehow with the commands to Noah in Genesis 9 and the later Jewish traditions that developed from those commands about a basic code of morality that God planned for Gentiles as well as for Jews, and therefore is bigger than or larger than simply the Mosaic law. If these things that are particularly offensive to the Jews are refrained from, Paul can continue to preach his law-free Gospel.

III. Paul's Second and Third Journeys

The second missionary journey and the beginning of Paul's subsequent travels then occupy the next panel or subsection of the second half of the Acts of the Apostles, spanning Acts 16:6-19:20. This time Paul's traveling companions include Silas and Timothy (in part because of a dispute with Mark and Barnabas over Mark's previous flight from their missionary journey). And if we are correct in interpreting those places where Luke changes from third person singular narrative to first person plural as autobiographical, where he speaks of "we" rather than "he," "Paul," or "they", presumably Luke, too, comes and goes during part of Paul's second missionary journey, and indeed the subsequent travels. Paul and company begin by revisiting and following up several of the cities they previously evangelized in Galatia, but then continue further afield to the west.

A. Philippi

We see in the first part of Acts 16 Paul wrestling with the decision-making process as to where to go next and receiving

Lydia

Paul

Paul

Silas

The Jailer

guidance through the Holy Spirit's prompting as to places to go or not to go. Eventually he receives a more dramatic vision, and a direct call from a man from Macedonia (that is, the northern half of what today we would call Greece). This prompted Paul to leave the Asian continent for the European continent and to move his ministry significantly further afield, both geographically as well as ethnically. His first major port of call for ministry in Macedonia (the northern part of Greece) described in Acts 16 is the community of Philippi, to whom he will later write a letter.

Here we read of the story of the first Christian convert in the continent of Europe, the woman Lydia. Philippi was largely a Roman colony and had a very small Jewish presence, apparently not even the ten male heads of households that were necessary to form a quorum and to create a Jewish synagogue. All that Paul found as he followed his principles of preaching first to the Jew and then to the Greek was a small community of Jewish women praying outdoors near the river that flowed through the town of Philippi. Lydia responds to Paul's message and, with her household, becomes the first European Christian that is on record in the Acts of the Apostles. It is significant that Paul preached to this group, baptized the new followers nevertheless, even though they were all women. Most Jewish leaders, and not a few Greeks or Romans, would have found this small gathering of women too inconsequential by the standards of the day to pay any attention to. Christianity clearly was breaking new ground in terms of attitudes toward women.

The second vignette while Paul is in Philippi involves his arrest, as the pattern consistently recurs which we see throughout the book of Acts; sooner or later he runs into local authorities, local Jewish leaders, or a combination thereof. He is put in prison, but while he and his companions are singing hymns at midnight an earthquake enables them miraculously to escape. But instead of fleeing and allowing the Philippian jailer to kill himself because of the shame that such an escape would call upon himself in the Roman viewpoint, he consoled the jailer that they are all still present—so impacting the jailer that he says, "What must I do to be saved?" Acts 16:31 records the famous verse, the so-called John 3:16 of Acts, in which Paul replies, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—and all your household." This is also one passage of several,

Acts 16:30-31

He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household.”

The Thessalonians



Acts 17:11

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

including the recent description of Lydia’s conversion, in which household baptism or salvation is referred to. This has spawned controversy over the history of the church: whether it is appropriate to baptize infants, for example, or not. No specific mention of small children ever appears in any of these passages, and at least in the context of the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his household (Acts 16:32-34) it specifically says that those who were baptized had faith or believed—presumably, therefore, old enough to exercise such faith.

B. Thessalonica and Berea

From Philippi, Paul traveled a little farther along the Greek coastline and arrived at the city of Thessalonica, another community to which he will later write, in this case, two apostolic epistles. One way of reading the description of Paul’s time in Thessalonica in Acts 17 suggests that he may have been present barely a month before some of those Jewish leaders who objected to his message run him out of town. Therefore, it is significant to note as we see again when we survey the epistles to the Thessalonians that the letter of 1 Thessalonians praises this fledgling church lavishly for how it has responded to God’s Word and grown in it. Those who are open to the Spirit’s leading need not have a long period of time before they themselves can turn around and be active in serving Christ and evangelizing others.

From Thessalonica, Paul continues to proceed along the coastal route to the nearby town of Berea. The most famous phrase that has made the Berean Christians well-known throughout church history comes in Acts 17:11, where it describes the Jewish people there as more noble than those in Thessalonica because they searched the Scriptures daily to see if the things Paul was teaching were true.

C. Athens

From Berea, Paul proceeds to the province of Achaia, the southern half of modern-day Greece, and to the center of so much Greek culture and history, the former capital when the empire was in Greek hands rather than in Roman—the city of Athens. Here, too, it is significant to notice yet again a different response by the townspeople. In Athens,

Mars Hill

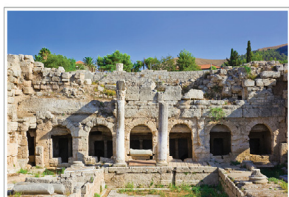


Photo courtesy of the U.S. Embassy in Athens, Greece

Acts 17:32-34

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed.

Corinth



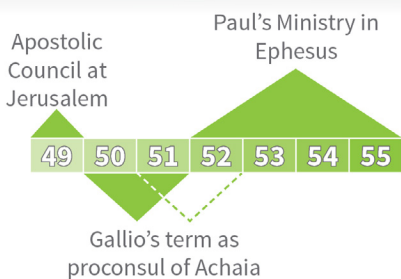
the local council, the Areopagus, convenes to hear Paul's preaching, which sounds to them as though he is preaching foreign deities. He gives his famous Mars Hill speech, again appropriately contextualized for yet another very different audience; this time the common ground is established by pointing to a statue or a shrine in town to an unknown god, an unknown god whom Paul wants to reveal as the God over all the universe, rather than the smaller gods and goddesses so well-known from the Greek lore.

As a result of Paul's preaching on Mars Hill, we read at the end of Acts 17:32-34 that some mocked, a few believed, others said, "We will hear you again on this"; but it seems that the majority of the people were not prompted to respond with faith in Jesus Christ. This is every bit as understandable a reaction to the preaching of the Gospel as the great outpouring of faith of the thousands of Pentecostal pilgrims a number of years earlier in Jerusalem. We must be careful not to assume either model is necessarily normative in Christian evangelism today, but in those centers of particularly strong non-Christian culture and religion of our world, it may not surprise us if the response turns out to be more like that at Athens than in Jerusalem.

D. Corinth

From Athens, Paul proceeds to the nearby port town of Corinth, described in Acts 18, yet again a city with a very different character. Corinth, as a seaport and a center of many immoral vices, was legendary in the ancient world. To "Corinthianize" was a slang slogan that developed in the Greek language to refer to somebody who committed prostitution. And in the great temple to Aphrodite on the large stone outcropping of rock that looked over the town, that hovered over it, was a temple with at one point, at least in pre-Christian times, up to 2,000 priests and priestesses with whom the Corinthian temple-goers could have sexual relations, in the belief that they were achieving unity with the gods or the goddesses in the process.

Not surprisingly, Paul has to spend nearly a year and a half preaching here, and his letters that he writes later to the church of Corinth show that even after that period of time they had matured very little. Also, in Corinth Paul is dragged



before the local magistrate Gallio, who is significant because he occupied that post for only a one-year period in Roman history, between A.D. 50 and A.D. 51, or depending on the system of interpreting the evidence possibly A.D. 51-52. That enables us to date Paul's time in Corinth relatively precisely and understand about how far along we are in this sequence of events. It enables us to move backwards and determine that the apostolic council took place at about the year 49, and move forward and understand his coming ministry, up to a three-year period in the city of Ephesus to span approximately to A.D. 52-55.

E. Ephesus

With Paul's ministry in Ephesus we have arrived at the beginning of Paul's third missionary journey. He stops there briefly as he is returning home to Antioch from his journeys into Greece, but promises to come back and spend more detailed time, which he does at the beginning of his third missionary journey. This is now the longest stay of any of Paul's throughout his missionary travels in one particular community.

There are three particular episodes that Luke discloses to us dealing with Paul's time in Ephesus. One involves the conversion of some former disciples of John the Baptist, even as he had previously converted Apollos at the end of Acts 18. These stories remind us of the hit-or-miss nature of communication in the ancient world, people who could have learned a certain degree about John, or a certain degree even about Jesus, and not yet heard the full story of the gospel message. So once again, even though it seems that belief and baptism are separated in these contexts, we probably are to understand that full-fledged Christian belief does not take place until Paul's preaching is completed. Then the disciples of John in Ephesus, like Apollos, are baptized.

The second episode involves the seven sons of a Jewish priest by the name of Sceva, who are practicing exorcism and try to invoke Paul's name and Jesus, the one whom Paul preaches. Here, if ever, we clearly see that Christian exorcism, or indeed Christian behavior more generally, is not that of applying a mechanistic formula. Without true faith in Jesus, the demons turn on the would-be exorcists instead. Paul also succeeds in

Ephesus: Paul's Third Journey Acts 18:23-19:20



PATTERN OF SALVATION IN ACTS 19:1-7



One day the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?”

Artemis



exorcising a slave girl who has been bringing much money to her owners because of her prophesying spirit. Combining this story with the final details of Acts 19 show us how Paul is arraigned before the authorities again on the charges of hurting the cause of the patron goddess of Ephesus, Artemis, the goddess of fertility or of the harvest and the hunt. Again, it is clear that Paul’s preaching has a significant impact on the idolatry of the Roman Empire, so much so that it threatens the pocketbook of those who are making money on false religion. Would that our Christian witness in preaching had a similar impact on the idolatry of the pagan, immoral practices of our communities and cultures today.

F. Troas

After Ephesus, we are not given any more narratives in the book of Acts, of a prolonged stay of Paul at any place. He returns to the city of Troas in northwest Turkey, where he has visited before— containing the almost amusing story of the death and resurrection of Eutychus, falling out of an upper room window because Paul preached so long, but significantly a reminder that Paul had the same resurrection power that Jesus and Peter previously had exhibited.

IV. Paul’s Final Travels to Jerusalem and Rome

Paul’s farewell speech to the Ephesian elders at Miletus reminds them that hard times await both him and them, and from this point onward the final panel of the book of Acts, 19:21-28:31, narrates Paul’s travels to Jerusalem, his arrest, imprisonment, various hearings there, ultimately leading him to appeal to Caesar, the Emperor Nero, and his trip there on the slave and criminal ship that finds him in Rome, under house arrest, preaching the Gospel freely and unhindered— that is, except for the chains that bound him to the soldier and kept him on his rented property until he could await the outcome of his fate there.

Paul Defends Himself

The themes that recur throughout these many different hearings are that Paul is not a law-breaker, but in fact he is a loyal Pharisee and he is on trial for his belief in the Resurrection, that it is the other Jews who have transgressed the will of God and not he or his fellow Christians. Before Felix, before Festus, both Roman governors, and then before Herod Agrippa II, the

Prominent Theological Issues Found in Acts:

1. God oversees development of the church and the progress of the gospel
2. Christian message: Resurrection and salvation for Jew and Gentile

Prominent Theological Issues Found in Acts:

3. Salvation, Repentance, Baptism, Forgiveness of Sins, Empowerment of the Holy Spirit
4. The Church will flourish regardless of persecution

great-grandson of Herod the Great, Paul makes these and similar defenses. When it is clear that he will not be freed by them, he makes his appeal to Rome, experiences that ill-fated ship voyage that occupies all of Acts 27, yet ultimately arrives in Rome and with his preaching there the book of Acts abruptly ends. We have earlier commented on several possible explanations for that abrupt end.

V. Four Theological Themes Found in Acts

If we recapitulate, then, some of the most important theological emphases that emerge from the Acts of the Apostles, we note at least four: (1) First, God oversees the development of the church and the progress of the Gospel; nothing happens accidentally. (2) Second, the message of Christianity centers on the resurrection of Jesus, making Him the author of salvation for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, on the same grounds: faith in Christ apart from the law. (3) Thirdly, that offer involves a “salvation package” of repentance, baptism, forgiveness of sins, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. (4) And fourthly, the church will progress and flourish despite and sometimes even because of persecution.

Clearly as we seek to apply the Acts of the Apostles today, we must take sight of this strong evangelistic focus: those who are not Christians are called to come to grips with the claims of Jesus and His first followers, and those who are already believers are challenged to be bold witnesses, trusting the power of the Spirit to spread His good news widely to all people.