

Acts

Adventures Of The Infant Church



10am Gathering
BIBLE STUDY GUIDE



Where we are going?

This series of studies covers the infancy of the Christian church, from about AD 34 to 48. The church has grown from a band of puzzled and dispirited fishermen to a vigorous body of 10,000 or more men, women and children. We will read how some bold and Spirit-inspired believers carried the revelation of Jesus into pagan territory.

Each study starts with a paragraph on the historical context. There is a suggestion for prayer, and then a series of notes and questions. At the end is another suggestion for prayer, and a take-home question.

Contents:

Page 3:	Introduction (Suggestion: read it before you go to the first study)	
Page 4:	A pious Jew sees a great light	Acts 9
Page 8:	A story of double vision	Acts 10,11
Page 12:	Explanation and escape	Acts 11,12
Page 17:	Off to the harvest (and the battle!)	Acts 13
Page 21:	Contentions and conversions	Acts 14
Page 23:	Resolution of a crisis	Acts 15

Introduction

The book of Acts is sometimes called The Acts of the Apostles, but the third Person of the Trinity is so prominent in it that some believe it should be called The Acts of the Holy Spirit. It starts where the gospels end, and the author is one of the gospel writers: Luke the physician, an educated Greek, who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary travels. It may have been compiled over a number of years, because it starts with the major events —

the ascension of Jesus, and Pentecost — which happened soon after the crucifixion of Jesus (probably in AD 33) and it ends with Paul in Rome in about AD 61 — a span of some 28 years.

Our studies start in Chapter 9 with the dramatic story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. (He later changed his name to Paul, perhaps as an act of humility: “paulos” means small). We meet Saul at the end of Chapter 8 as a young man who stood by the clothes of some Jews while they stoned Stephen (the first known martyr for the name of Jesus.) Saul consented to Stephen’s death. That very day was the start of a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, headed by Saul, with the result that believers were scattered throughout Judaea and Samaria — and even further, as we shall see. Scholars hold that the events of chapter 9 occurred within a year or two of the crucifixion. That had given time for the church of Jesus to grow from a puzzled and dispirited band of eleven Galilean fishermen to a body of at least 5000 men (which must mean at least 10,000, counting families: Acts 4:4.) They were joined even by “a large number of priests” (Acts 6:7), although most of the priests had bitterly opposed Jesus, and continued to do so. In the church were both orthodox Jews from Judaea and Greek-speaking Jews who had imbibed some Greek ways of thinking. Already, human beings being what they are, there had been some dissension between the two groups.

After the conversion of Saul, this series of studies encompasses the twin visions of Peter and Cornelius the centurion (Chapter 10), who was the first Gentile to be baptized as a Christian, and in Chapter 11 Peter’s bold witness in Jerusalem. In Chapter 12 we read of the murder by Herod of John Zebedee, Peter’s imprisonment and miraculous escape, and the death of Herod. Paul’s first missionary journey, with descriptions of the many scrapes he got into, occupies Chapters 13 and 14, leading up to the great Council in Jerusalem in about AD 48 (Acts 15).

So read on to find out how the young church, barely two years old, grew with fits and starts, but relentlessly, under God’s power.

Study 1: A Pious Jew Sees A Great Light

Acts 9

Context: Jesus has been dead (physically) for one or two years. Transformed by the coming of the Holy Spirit from a small band of puzzled disciples into a body of believers numbering 10,000 or more, the church has spread beyond Jerusalem, but probably consists almost entirely of Jews. The city has heard the first great Christian sermon from the mouth of Peter, and seen the imprisonment of two apostles and the death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. A vicious persecution by a man called Saul is about to come to a startling end.

Pray that God’s Spirit may be with you as you explore this chapter.

The chapter tells how a punctiliously pious Jew was walking in darkness, but saw a great light, and became a feisty fighter for the doctrines he had

1 viciously opposed, and how some special people, unheard of elsewhere in the NT, were endowed with special abilities for special purposes.

Read verses 1-19

1. How many direct interventions of God's power can you discern in this passage?
2. How, do you think, did Saul find his way to the house of Judas of Straight Street? The "men that were with him" (verse 7) must have taken him there. They were struck speechless when they heard a voice but saw nothing. Were they guided by another divine intervention?
3. Ananias was, understandably, reluctant to go to a house where there was a known persecutor. Was he being disobedient, or just cautious? He talks back to God as though God does not know what kind of man Saul was. Do you ever catch yourself doing the same?
4. Although it is clear that Saul knew the arguments very well both for and against belief in Jesus (verses 20 and 28), do you think Ananias was a bit hasty in baptising Saul, after so recent an encounter with Jesus? Saul had spent only three days in Judas's house. Perhaps Judas (not identified as any other Judas in the NT: it was a common name) was an ace at rapid discipleship instruction!

Read verses 20-31

5. Jews of both kinds were united in their distrust of Paul, and their desire to kill him (verses 23, 29). Why was this so?

Can you imagine a modern preacher being let down from a building to escape vigilantes (verse 25)? Not in this country, but in dozens of others such escapes are commonplace.

6. Barnabas (verse 27) was another man with special qualities selected by God for a special purpose. We have met him before (Acts 4; 36) as a donor to the church. What can we learn from Barnabas's character about "conflict resolution"?

Now Paul, escaping from the first of many plots against his life, moves off (verse 30) to Tarsus, his home town in Cilicia (now in south-eastern Turkey). That is the last we hear of him for a couple of chapters. The spot-light turns to Peter.

Read verses 32-43

It had been agreed among the apostles that Peter would work as an "apostle to the Jews", and Paul to the Gentiles (Galatians 2: 8). But Peter's remit has widened: Lydda and Joppa are in Samaria, and there are already "saints" there. We read in Acts 8 that a very effective mission was carried out at a city in Samaria by Philip, one of the seven deacons ordained by the apostles for administrative work (Acts 6: 1-7), but obviously that was not enough for Philip! After all, he was "full of the Spirit and of wisdom"! Now Peter is "travelling about the country" of Samaria.

7. What is the significance of the church's rapid build-up in Samaria (verses 31, 32)? See John 4: 9. (The woman's remark was very restrained: the attitude of many Jews to the Samaritans was hatred and contempt — see John 8: 48). See also the command in Acts 1: 8.

Thus there was a huge barrier for Peter to overcome. The Samaritans revered the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) but were viewed as unclean by the Jews because their forebears had intermarried with the occupying pagans after the invasion by the Assyrians in 722 BC.

8. Can you think of two peoples to-day, each taught from childhood to hate and despise the other? Yet there are members on each side prepared to listen to and befriend members of the other.

Thus it was with Peter. Can it have been anything but the Holy Spirit that was changing Peter's attitude? It was a stepwise change: we will learn of the next step in the next chapter.

9. We are not told that Aeneas was a believer, nor that he asked to be healed, nor even that he had faithful friends, like the man let down through the roof in Luke 5:17-20. So why did Peter offer him healing? Nor are we told that Dorcas was a believer, although she was a skilled dressmaker and donor to the poor. But obviously her friends had faith in Peter's healing power. What was the effect of these two miracle healings?

A small point with a big meaning: Dorcas was not just a believer; she is called a "disciple", by the feminine form of the same word by which male disciples were known. She is the only woman thus described in the New Testament, but the name tells us a lot about the barriers being broken down.

And another small point: Peter's host Simon (verse 43) was a tanner. Because tanners were constantly in contact with dead beasts they were ritually unclean, and so shunned by strict Jews. Another small step on Peter's journey!

Close with thanks, praise and prayer. Pray that the church may continue to be built up throughout the world, and to welcome people of all races and religious backgrounds.

Think it out — some take-home reflections:

If you had to summarize the lessons of this chapter, what salient point would you select?

What have you learnt from the chapter about God's method of bringing his message to mankind, and the part which these events played in the long sequence that has brought us the Gospel to-day?

Study 2: A Story Of Double Vision.

Acts 10-11

Context: The church is about five years old, counting the Pentecost event (Acts 2) as its birthday. We have seen how the Good News of Jesus has already spread into Samaria and Syria, and that there are believers in both those territories. Paul, the converted persecutor, has fled violent opposition in Jerusalem and is busy in his home country, Cilicia. Peter is on his second recorded evangelistic tour in Samaria, overcoming the enmity between Jews and Samaritans. Now he has to take another giant step!

Pray for patience and insight as you study this intriguing story.

Read chapter 10, verses 1-23a

Caesarea, on the coast of Samaria, was Herod's seat of authority under the Romans. It was a splendid sea-port built by Herod the Great, named after Caesar because Herod liked to curry favour with whoever was in power! Joppa and Caesarea are nearly 40 km apart, so Cornelius's servants had some walking to do to get to Peter's house, and Peter with his friends the next day to get to Cornelius's! Some urgency is noticeable: much of both journeys must have been done in darkness. They would not have found a deli at every village on the way, but there may have been an inn or two.

Imagine Peter's attitude when commanded to go to a Gentile's house (especially since his primary work was as apostle to the Jews)! But the vision of the "sheet let down from heaven" had prepared him for the shock.

The gods and goddesses of Roman mythology behaved in capricious, jealous and violent ways. Some members of the occupying force were obviously attracted to the One God of the Jews, and were versed in their Scriptures (the Old Testament). So Cornelius was not just any Gentile. He was classed as one who "feared God", and prayed regularly. So his heart and mind were prepared.

The God he prayed to would have been the God of Israel, and his alms would have gone to the Jews in Caesarea, but he would not have been circumcised, and so not seen as a table-companion by a strict Jew. The same would have applied to Cornelius's servants, but surely they were offered a meal as well as a bed in Simon's house (verse 23).

1. What characters of the Jewish God and his Son would have attracted these God-fearers? We will meet more of them in later chapters.

2. Were there any precedents for contact with centurions in the life of Jesus? See Matthew 8: 5-13.

- 2** 3. Can you discern some character features shared by the two centurions (Matthew 8 and Acts 10) which made them receptive of The Way?

Are such features common in people of power to-day? (Or in anyone else, for that matter?)

Read verses 23b-33

Note that there are paired visions in both chapters 9 and 10. In chapter 9 one outside the church (Saul) and one inside it (Ananias) receive direct messages from God. In chapter 10 one outside the church (Cornelius) and one inside it (Peter) are likewise visited.

4. Whose voice was it that was demolishing the barrier between Jews and Gentiles? See verses 13, 19, 28. Note that Peter and Cornelius treat each other with the utmost courtesy — excessive courtesy, in Cornelius's case (verse 25).
5. What did Peter mean by God "accepting" those of any nation who do the right thing?

Is a record of good works (like giving alms to the poor) enough to get us to heaven?

Where do good works fit in the Christian salvation story?

Read verses 34-48

6. The report of Peter's sermon is no more than one paragraph — it is probably Luke's outline version of it — yet the sermon convinced "a large gathering" that Jesus was Lord of all, empowered by the Spirit to heal, cast out demons, break the power of death, forgive sins, and at

the end time to judge. Suggest why those people were so ready to be convinced: verses 33 and 37 may be the clue. Note that the message of God through Jesus was common knowledge among the people in Cornelius's house (verse 36).

7. Why were the "circumcised believers" (Peter's friends from Joppa) so astonished (verse 45) that the Holy Spirit should come upon Cornelius's household?

Read chapter 11, verses 1-18

The news of Peter's activities got to Jerusalem before he did! But the account of them may have been skewed in order to discredit him. We know that Paul suffered from such biased reporting later.

Here we meet more "circumcised believers" who needed to be convinced that "God does not show favouritism". They held that, for Gentiles were to be admitted to the church, they had to be circumcised and keep the Jewish food laws. (They caused much trouble later.)

8. We may be shocked by such an attitude, but are we so different? Today, as then, true belief is accompanied by all sorts of customs and rituals (think up a few!). Are we careful enough to discern the essentials from the frills?

9. And what is the force of "and all your household"? It is a fair bet that there were children among the "large gathering" of Acts 10: 27. If so, we must assume that they also showed the signs of the Spirit's work, and were baptised. Peter declared at the church's beginning that the promise of baptism and the Spirit were for whole households (Acts 2: 38,39).

There are other accounts of whole households being baptised; look them up, if you wish, now or later: Acts 16: 15 and 33, 1 Corinthians 1: 16.

10. Why, do you think, did the apostles give such great value to baptism?

Pray, especially for those character features that made the centurions ready to grant allegiance to Jesus. Give thanks and praise for all the bold men and women who have gone against the grain and preserved the Gospel for us.

Think it out — some take-home reflections: Why are these events so crucial in the development of the young church? What lessons are there here for the present-day Church? And for you personally? How far does the drive for “inclusiveness” take us?

Study 3: Explanation and escape **Acts 11 (part) and 12**

Context: We have read about the rapid spread of the Jesus church into Samaria and beyond. And it has spread from Jewry into the world of the Gentiles. A dramatic change has come upon Peter, who is its principal proponent at this stage. We will read how a similar change has come upon the church in Jerusalem. We will also read how a vicious opponent of it intended to snuff out Peter, but instead got snuffed out himself. The year is AD 44, and the church is eleven years old.

Pray for open minds and vigorous discussion as you study this story.

Read chapter 11, verses 19-26

Note that there were several towns called Antioch: this one is in Syria, a flourishing commercial city. The word “Greeks” (verse 20) was used more or less interchangeably with “Gentiles” (see, for instance, Romans 1: 16), because Greek was the common language in the Eastern Roman Empire. So not all those called “Greeks” were necessarily Greek-speakers.

The “persecution in connection with Stephen” did not have the effect desired by its perpetrators! We must pray that present-day persecutions, vicious though they are, will prove equally futile.

At first the Gospel went “only to the Jews” (verse 19), but now, nine or ten years later, a “great number” of Greeks are responding to the preaching of the men from Cyprus and Cyrene, Greek-speaking Jews.

1. Compare the two reactions (some years apart) when news of Gentile inclusion reached the church in Jerusalem (verses 2 and 22).

Why would the church leaders in Jerusalem choose Barnabas to go to Antioch (verse 22)? Why did they send him?

And now another “great number of people” are believing! What qualities made Barnabas so effective?

13

The events of chapters 11 and 12 overlap in time. Chapter 12 ends in AD 44, and scholars date the “whole year” of Acts 11:26 at AD 45-46, so Saul (Paul) has been out of the picture for some nine or ten years now, including the three years he spent in Damascus and Arabia (Galatians 1: 17-19). No doubt he was busy evangelising the towns around his home city Tarsus, the cities of northern Syria and Cilicia, now south-east Turkey.

2. The “Christians” must have known about Paul’s work. Why, do you think, did Barnabas go and get him?

For the third time, “great numbers” are mentioned (verse 26)!

Note: “Christians” were almost certainly so called in derision, and the word only occurs twice more in the NT, both times with a hint of contempt. If there had been quote marks in Greek script, Luke would probably have used them. In other contexts, believers are called brethren, disciples, or saints.

3. Secular sources put the famine that Agabus predicted at AD 46 and 47. It would have helped his reputation as a prophet that his prediction came true. (Agabus appears again as a prophet when Paul is on his last journey to Jerusalem).

Why, would you think, would famine have hit the brothers living in Judea (verse 29) harder than those in Antioch?

What can we learn here about generosity?

Read chapter 12, verses 1-11

This Herod is Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great in whose reign Jesus was born. He had a very chequered past, having annoyed a succession of leaders in Rome, where he was brought up. He was only

3 acceptable as a ruler of the Jews because his grandmother Mariamne was descended from the dynasty of Jewish warrior-priests, the Hasmoneans. That is why, no doubt, he wanted to “please the Jews” (verse 3). We are not told why he chose James Zebedee (one of the original Twelve) for slaughter, but the fact that he did so indicates that James was a prominent leader.

4. Think of some reasons why he would have chosen Peter as his next victim. What had Peter done recently? Why would killing him be especially pleasing to “the Jews”?

5. Why did Herod choose the feast of Unleavened Bread (verse 3) for his persecution? Why would the occasion have had great significance for the Christians as well as the Jews?

6. How could it be that the soldiers were not woken by the bright light, the angel’s voice, or the clank of chains falling off? A good bedtime drink of wine, or God’s power at work? What events in the next sequence suggest the latter explanation?

7. When he had led Peter into the street, the angel disappeared from sight. Can you think of an occasion when another messenger from God (of higher rank!) simply disappeared? See Luke 24: 31.

Read verses 12-17

We can excuse Peter’s not realizing that his escape was not all a wonderful dream (verse 11), for so it must have seemed until he found himself alone in the cold night air.

8. But what of the good folk who had been making earnest prayer for him (verses 5 and 12)? Why were they so surprised that Peter had been sprung? Is that not what they were praying for? Are we sometimes surprised that our prayers are answered?

Perhaps this was an occasion when God did “far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3: 20). Note that Peter says that it was “the Lord” (not an angel) who brought him out of prison.

The James of verse 17 is James the brother of the Lord (Matthew 13: 55), and the probable author of the Epistle of James. Paul recognised him as an apostle (Galatians 1: 19). He had not accepted Jesus as Messiah during Jesus’ time on earth, but was granted a special revelation by the risen Jesus (I Corinthians 15: 7) and rapidly rose to leadership in the church at Jerusalem. We will meet him again presiding over the crucial Council of Jerusalem in ch.15 (AD 48). He was stoned to death in AD 61 at the behest of the High Priest Ananus. It is small wonder that Peter, having commanded that James be informed of his release, moved to another place (verse 17).

Read verses 18-25

9. The death of Herod, and its occasion, are well attested from secular sources (AD 44). Luke again reports the power of angelic visitation, and puts Herod’s demise down to his hubris in not rebutting the flattery he received (verse 22). Jesus called himself “Son of Man” throughout his life, and only admitted his divine status at his trial (Matthew 27: 64). Why, do you think, was Jesus so reticent?

And why did Herod have no such inhibition?

And what about being eaten by worms (verse 23)? A bit over the top? It is suggested that he died of bowel obstruction. In that condition, the belly does indeed writhe as though it were full of large worms (visible peristalsis). Luke must have seen many such cases, and uses the commonly accepted causal language. Herod had become noticeably more aggressive in the previous year or two, and he took four days to die. Both those facts accord with the suggestion.

Finish with praise for the way the infant church accepted “Greeks”, and give thanks that people from other lands are welcome at HTA. Pray for another great surge of Christian belief and obedience.

Think it out — some take-home reflections: Are churches, as organisations, slower to perceive the need for change than individual members? Most great reforms, like the one we are reading about, are from bottom up, not from top down. Is there a lesson here for to-day?

Study 4: Off to the harvest (and the battle!)

Chapter 13

Context: It is AD 46: the church is about 13 years old, Herod Agrippa is dead, and a Roman procurator, one Cuspius Fadus, not known for gentleness, rules all the land between the Jordan and the sea, and some to the east of the Jordan. There are Christians in many places around the eastern end of the Mediterranean, thanks to the work of Philip, Peter, Paul, some unnamed men from Cyprus and Cyrene (a major port in present Libya), and probably many others. "Greeks" as well as Jews are joining the church in large numbers. Antioch in Syria is rivalling, if not displacing, Jerusalem as a centre of Christian mission. The church is about to take a giant leap forward, by sending missionaries westward into territory which is now Turkey.

Pray for readiness to receive new ideas as you study this chapter.

Read chapter 13, verses 1-3

They were a motley crew in Antioch! There was Simon, probably a black man, and Manaen of high social rank (brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, the uncle of the Herod we met in the last chapter, an able ruler but guilty of John the Baptist's death); Lucius from North Africa, and the converted persecutor Saul. But they were all held together by their love of Jesus.

1. They were not only worshipping God but fasting. The practice has largely disappeared in many evangelical circles. What is its value? Should we bring it back?

2. Was it fasting that enhanced their spiritual perception, so that they were receptive of the Holy Spirit's voice? Note that Saul and Barnabas were "called" to their special task by the Spirit, but "sent" by the gathered church after the laying on of hands. At heart it is "the Lord of the harvest" (Matthew 9: 38) who sends labourers into his harvest, but has granted the church the privilege of being his agents in the matter.

Read verses 4-12

3. Whose child (and servant) was Elymas (verse 10)? His assumed name Bar-Jesus, "son of Joshua" represents a claim to be someone great, a rescuer or liberator. Is that why Paulus, an "intelligent man", was captivated by him?

Can you think of present-day (apparently) intelligent people who are captivated by demonic systems that claim to "liberate"? Think of scientology and other bogus "churches".

4. Note that what Paulus wanted to hear from the missionaries was "the word of God" (verse 7). Is that just what Luke called the message of Barnabas and Saul, or would they have claimed themselves to be delivering the word of God? If so, it is a very high and exalted claim.

Would you be suspicious of someone making such a claim to-day? If so, how would you check it out? (A commentator said that Michael Jackson sang with "the voice of God"!)

5. Was it the teaching or the miracle that persuaded Paulus? Note that the two were closely associated in people's minds. See Mark 1: 27. But we must note also that "signs and miracles" can be counterfeit (Matthew 24: 24), and, if not accompanied by godly teaching, condemned as such.
6. The Holy Spirit was clearly the guide and giver of power to these early Christians (verses 2, 4, 9). How do you react when someone says "God (or the Spirit) told me to . . ." ? What is the criterion of

16 | Acts 9 – 15

genuineness?

Read verses 13-25

No reason is given for the departure of John Mark, and speculation is likely to be fruitless. It is clear, though, that Paul (we can call him that now) was easy to befriend, but also easy to offend. He set extremely high standards for himself, and expected colleagues to make similar sacrifices.

Antioch in Pisidia was a trading city on an important road between Ephesus and Cilicia: a Roman colony with a strong Jewish population. Gentiles who were not God-fearing would have been worshippers of Cybele, a mother-goddess of nature whose cult began in Pisidia, but became popular throughout the Roman empire. She was a bit like Gaia, who has been revived in modern times. Paul and Barnabas followed their usual practice of going first to the synagogue (verse 14), and were not only welcomed there but invited to speak. It is as though there was already some knowledge of these bringers of new doctrine.

Note that Paul's audience included both Jews and Gentiles, and the motion he made with his hand would have swept over both groups. The Gentiles were "God-fearers" like Cornelius. Paul addresses them all as brethren, including both in the phrase "our fathers" (verses 17, 32).

7. Paul starts his great sermon with a brief summary of God's dealings with Israel (verses 16-23). The same pattern was followed by Stephen in his defence before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7). Why was that a good move?

But when he gets to David, he pursues Jewish history no further. He alludes to two great promises (verses 23-25): of God to David that his house and his kingdom would endure: "your throne will be established forever", (II Samuel 7: 16); and of John the Baptist to a mixed crowd in the Desert of Judea, that one greater than he would come, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, "whose sandals I am not fit to carry" (Matthew 3:11).

8. What, in your view, was the importance of David and of John in Paul's discourse?

Read verses 26-39

Paul's sermon continues with a potted history of Jesus, pointing out that the major events were all predicted in "the words of the prophets that are read every sabbath".

- 4** 9. In what way can the words of Psalm 2 be related to the resurrection? Perhaps they need to be connected with those of Psalm 16 (verse 35).

In between comes a quotation from Isaiah 55: 3, which his audience, steeped in knowledge of “the prophets” would have completed for themselves: a promise to any who incline their ear and come to God will be partakers of an “eternal covenant” — no less than the power that brought back from the dead the Lord Jesus, and equips his people with everything good to do his will (Hebrews 13: 20-21).

10. What is the final great promise that emerges from the death and resurrection of Jesus?

Read verses 40-51

Paul was nothing if not forthright! His sermon ended with a warning. Perhaps there was already some restlessness in his audience. There were Jews and Gentiles who were convinced by Paul’s argument, and others who were repelled by it. Jesus had predicted such division: see Matthew 10: 34-36. The Gentiles were especially glad of the good news (verse 48).

11. What two great consequences flowed from this first great sermon, with follow-up teaching, in a largely Gentile and pagan city?

Give thanks for the forthrightness of Paul and the hundreds of Christian evangelists, scholars, pastors, teachers and martyrs who have brought the Gospel to our own age in our own language.

Think it out — a take-home reflection: What are the qualities of Christian belief that have enabled it to survive the onslaughts (physical, demonic, and intellectual) of all the “Herods” since the first century?

Study 5: Contentions and conversions.

Chapter 14

Context: Paul and Barnabas have been run out of the town of Antioch, and “shaken the dust from their feet” (Acts 13: 51), which is a symbolic way of saying “OK, you don’t want us, but don’t blame us if you get clobbered.” But they hadn’t finished with Antioch yet. As we shall see, after missions in three other cities, they were back there strengthening the new converts on their return to the other Antioch (in Syria) from which they had been sent. But trouble is brewing. There were unconverted Jews who wanted none of the new openness to Gentiles, and even some converted ones who agreed with them. The church is facing a crisis.

Pray for ingenuity in finding the central message of this chapter.

Read verses 1-7

As in Antioch, so in Iconium, there were both ready converts and strong opponents. The two towns are about 90 km apart, so the missionaries must have spent at least three days on the journey. This time they were able to spend “considerable time” in the town before they got wind of a plot to harm them.

1. Is there something in common between those who believed and those who didn't? (Hint: there is nothing like a common enemy to unite people together!)
2. It was not just the preaching that persuaded many people in Iconium to believe in Jesus, but “miraculous signs and wonders”. How could some be so stubborn as not to believe in the face of the miraculous signs? What held them back?
3. It was the “message of God's grace” that was confirmed by the miracle. What do you understand by the word “grace”?

The word does not occur at all in Matthew or Mark, only once in Luke, and three times in John; but it is common in Acts, and even more so in Paul's epistles. Can you detect a slow unfolding of the disciples' understanding of “grace”?

Read verses 8-20

Iconium and Lystra are both in high country in central Turkey, and it is believed that the evangelists were there in summer time, when it gets very hot. This time the journey was shorter, some 35 km. The two towns are very different: Iconium is on a fertile plain, its people mainly farmers and Greek-speakers; Lystra on high barren hills, its people herders and freebooters. It is not known what the “Lycaonian language” was: possibly a corrupted Greek mixed with Assyrian. Both towns were Roman colonies, but Roman law does not seem to have been enforced! Lycaonia was at that time part of the Roman province of Galatia, while Iconium was in Phrygia.

4. This time we are told why the apostle offered healing to the cripple. What was Paul's clue?
5. What does the reaction of the Lycaonians tell about their religion?

And what does the response of the apostles (note that Barnabas is now an apostle!) tell us about theirs?

6. Was Paul a little thoughtless in calling their sacrificial intentions “worthless things”?

In Greek mythology there is no one coherent account of the creation of the world. A primeval mother-goddess (Gaia) emerges out of nothingness or chaos, gives birth to heaven and is fertilised by it, and then to a number of deities who kill, eat, betray, castrate and seduce each other until finally Zeus gains supremacy as king of the gods. The Jewish account, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”, stands in majestic contrast. Paul quotes from Exodus 20: 11 in verse 15.

7. What two actions of the One God does Paul use to indicate his character?

There is no mention of a synagogue in Lystra, nor of “large numbers of” converts such as were persuaded in other cities, including Derbe. We may assume, however, that some days passed before the riot, and that the healed cripple and others heard the good news (verse 15) before Paul was stoned and dragged out of the city. “The disciples” (verses 20, 21) must have been local converts, and some of them must have helped Paul back to the town, dressed his wounds, and given him shelter.

Read verses 21-28

8. The apostles had walked a good 100 km to get to Derbe, where they find a receptive audience. They then do a follow-up journey to the recently evangelised cities. What sort of life on earth does he foresee for these new Christians?
9. Elders, prayer and fasting (verse 23)! How could such a well-ordered church have emerged so quickly? The apostles were not content to leave a bunch of converts to look after themselves, but insisted on a disciplined body. What can we learn here about church planting?
10. Note that it is the Lord in whom these new disciples put their trust (verse 23), not in the apostles. Later, especially in Corinth, factions grew up around individual apostles. What can we learn from that?

Give thanks for the peace and freedom in this country, and pray that we do

not lapse into spiritual laziness as a result.

Think it out — a take-home reflection. Opposition has always followed the radical proclamation of the Gospel, and it always will. What can we do to support Christians for whom the opposition is not only verbal and administrative, but vicious and violent?

Study 6: Resolution of a crisis.

Chapter 15

Context: Paul and Barnabas are back from their first missionary journey, which took in five cities in what is now Turkey. They have returned to Antioch in Syria, now their missionary base. Only in Perga, where they “preached the word”, is it not recorded that they made disciples. In all the other four there are believers, and a church structure with elders is emerging.

It has been a remarkably successful journey, in spite of the apostles’ being run out of the four towns by opponents. Tension has been mounting in Jerusalem since news of the inclusion of Gentiles by Peter’s ministry reached the ears of the Judean believers (Acts 11: 22). The church could be split apart by those who maintained that circumcision and adherence to Jewish food laws were necessary for inclusion in the church.

Pray for discernment to decide which decisions still apply to Christian practice and which do not.

Read verses 1-4

1. Paul, Barnabas, and their friends are welcomed wherever they go. We know that Samaria had been effectively evangelized by Philip (Acts 8: 40), but should we be surprised that there were “brothers” in Phoenicia too? We may guess that some of them were Gentiles.

Why were they made so glad by the news? Can you think of someone who had had healing contact with Jesus? See Mark 7: 24-30. No doubt many neighbours had heard her story.

Read verses 5-21

2. Should we be surprised that some Pharisees had become believers? It would be hard for them, as it had been for Paul the Pharisee (Philippians 3: 4-8) to count all their previous pious practices as

5

worthless rubbish.

3. We may guess that “much discussion” (verse 7) got a bit heated. Why was Peter’s intervention so persuasive?

Note that both he and James (verse 13) addressed the whole assembly as “brothers”. Is there something we should learn here about discussion with other Christians with different views from ours?

4. What did Peter mean by “the yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear”? Note that it is in contrast with “grace” — that word again!

James quotes from Amos, an eighth-century prophet, contemporary with Isaiah, whose book predicts both the captivity of Israel and her return. James uses the prediction of the return, with its inclusion of Gentiles, to justify his policy. In a previous passage, God had said, through the mouth of Amos, “you [Israel] only have I chosen of all the families of the earth” — but for special punishment, not for special favours (Amos 3; 2)! The sin for which the punishment was due was rapacious exploitation of the poor. There is special responsibility on God’s chosen people!

Before Jesus came, the Jews called themselves “the people”: all the others were “the nations”. There is therefore a noteworthy joining of words here: God calls a people for himself out of the nations! Remember that James had had a private talk with Paul before the council began (Galatians 2:2.)

5. Why did James choose just four things that new converts should abstain from?

Should Christians not eat black pudding, Blutwurst, etc? Why no mention of theft or murder, for instance? Does verse 21 give the clue?

(The resolution made by the gathered church is mainly directed to Gentile converts). In fact these prohibitions were slow to catch on: John the seer had to repeat them about 30 years later! See Revelation 2: 14, 20.

Read verses 22-35

22 | Acts 9 – 15

Note that James spoke with authority as leader of the church in Jerusalem, but now “the whole church” is united in its policy. It is clear that the church in Antioch was ready to accept the concerted word of James, the elders, and the brothers. James denies the genuineness of those who “came down from Judea to Antioch” (verse 1), who might otherwise have been thought to speak with his and the church’s authority.

6. What a splendid letter! Not a word is wasted. Who was the church’s guide in the choice of the message and the messengers?

We have not met this Judas before, but he has the same surname as the Joseph of Acts 1: 23, and was probably his brother. The fact that Joseph was on the short list to replace Judas Iscariot means that he too was highly regarded. Judas and Silas were both recognised as prophets (verse 32), and may have been among the 70 whom Jesus sent before him on his final journey to Jerusalem as heralds or emissaries (Luke 10: 1.)

7. Here again we see special people being chosen because of special suitability for a task. What were their special qualities? Can we learn something about church appointments?
8. What special qualities are required of prophets? Does the modern church have a prophetic function?

Read verses 36-40

9. How sad! Two great saints at loggerheads! But we must not assume that great leaders are without fault. Paul may have been unable to control his tongue at times, and “even Barnabas was led astray” (Galatians 2: 13), along with Peter, before this corrective action was taken. Is it the case that some faults are exaggerations of good qualities?

How can we find a place between firm (but harshly expressed) conviction, and too great a willingness to be swayed by popular movements or errant doctrines?

Finish the study, and the series, with joyful thanks for all that you have

learnt, and a prayer for resolve to carry out the teaching.

Think it out — some take-home reflections: The book of Acts describes the early struggles and successes of the Christian church. But the 21st century is not like the first.

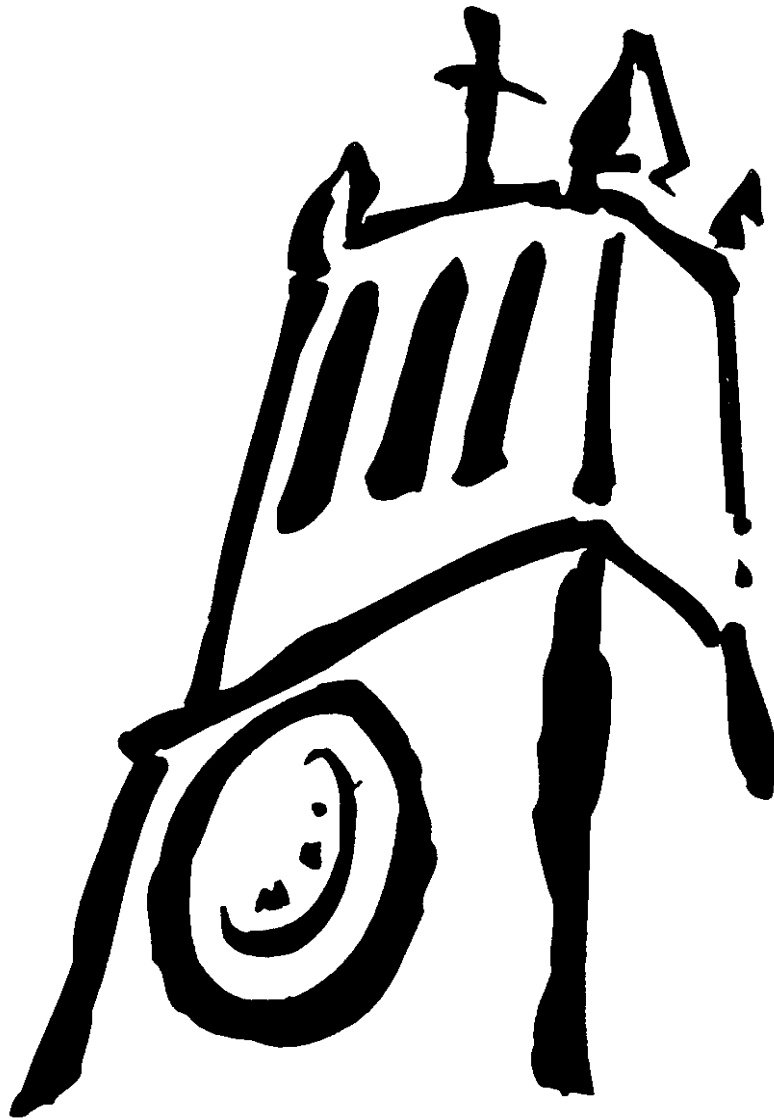
To what extent does the present hierarchy of archbishops (with one supreme one in Canterbury), of bishops, priests (elders) and deacons represent the best possible organization? What voice should lay people have?

How can we stop the church becoming an empire in its own right, with large funds, properties, bureaucracies, and even armies, which have to be maintained at all cost?

It is clear that the early church saw mission and the proclamation of the Gospel as its primary drive, but was not slack in looking after the poor and giving moral direction to individuals and to societies. Where is the compromise between “pure” gospel-preaching and social action?

If time allows, read through the Epistle of James, which may be the first to have been written, soon after the Great Council. See if you can find echoes in it of the events and decisions of Acts 15.

6



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