

BOOK OF ACTS PART 2

Chapters 13 – 18

The Missionary Journeys

Summary of Chapters 1 – 12

As we start our second period of studying the Book of Acts it is worth looking back at what stands out from our studies of the first part.

Some of the insights shared related to the fact that the early church was characterised as being filled with the Holy Spirit and manifested the presence of God in all that it did. Indeed, on one occasion, those who did not have the experience, yet were attracted to it, "*durst not join themselves*" to them conscious of the fact that they had not been so transformed and therefore could neither be witnesses nor share in the fellowship.

Significant emphasis was laid on obedience in following the Lord and on being faithful to Him in all things.

Interestingly enough, despite being commissioned to "*go into all the world and preach*" their initial action was to devote themselves to the "*apostles' doctrine, breaking of bread, prayers and fellowship*". The first recorded action was to go to the Temple at the hour of prayer. God came first to them. But, on coming out of the Temple, opportunities spread before them to preach that gospel which they took without fear or favour. That message emphasised forgiveness because of Jesus' death and resurrection and was to be believed preceded by repentance and followed by baptism.

It was a positive message. Although it carried implications of guilt for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, its main thrust was to promise life and blessing described as "*times of refreshing*" - a concept frequently used by Paul later to describe the beneficial effect of the gospel and its outworking in believers' lives.

While these early believers addressed flaws that appeared in the fellowship, some inexcusable, like Ananias and Saphira's deception (not economy), and others circumstantial, like the widows' complaint, they were addressed fairly and squarely, being resolved on the basis of divine principles.

While they exercised their stewardship, with much persecution, God was at work and there were a series of divine, providential, incidents (which, in retrospect, suggest an overarching Divine strategy) where individuals were 'rewarded' for their sincerity and shown the truth through miraculous and unexpected means to complete their conversion. In that way the church was in a better position for deliberately taking the message to "*uttermost parts of the earth*". That paved the way for the Missionary Journeys which follow in our next section.

It was a significant phase.

By chapter 12 the united gathering of Pentecost with everyone “*all together with one accord in one place*” becomes geographically fragmented – but not divided. They were identified as a single entity, interestingly known as “*Christians*” because of their central and consistent emphasis on Jesus as “*The Christ*”.

Chapter 12 finishes with Peter in prison and the rest of the church gathered in prayer for him. It demonstrates the significance of the body (a picture used of the church - one corporate being but operationally able to extend its many members in unilateral –even unique – action but all the time related to, and supported by, each and all the members. Not everyone does the same thing. There are differences of ‘ministries’ but all are wonderfully coordinated and belong to the One body significantly characterised by the presence of God in an awareness of his purpose.

That is the essence of the Missionary enterprise which forms the bulk of the remaining section. Two of their number are separated and commissioned to take the message on behalf of the others but supported by them. Chapter 13 sets out the circumstances and sequel of that commissioning and the start of the Missionary Journeys.

Chapter 13 Missionary Journey 1

In the spread of the gospel recorded in the first half of Acts, the one church has separate manifestations in different locations. Each is the same as the other in its constitution of being a coherent collection of believers and in its essence of being a body yet together constituting the One Church.

The church in Antioch seems to have grown from the expansion into Gentile areas and is complementary to the longer established one in Jerusalem. In that sense it is a sample church and a facsimile of the universal church through which “*the manifold wisdom of God*” is to be demonstrated.

Yet it exemplifies the ‘body made up of constituent parts, each with a vital role’, principle. It was a little bunch of men in the Antioch church. Were they the leaders? Were they the ‘council’ of the whole NT church? We don’t know.

What we do know is that they spent their time worshipping and fasting; they devoted themselves and gave their time to priorities at the expense of other claims on their time.

No wonder the Holy Spirit revealed to them that they should “*separate unto me Saul and Barnabas*” for a special work. Obedient to that command, they did so and identified with them, laying hands on them in an act of identification. That illustrates the body principle. Individual, often specially gifted ones, do the specific work but do so on behalf of the whole body and supported fully by it, just as the human body contorts itself to carry out certain tasks but acting as a coordinated, coherent, whole and single unit. It illustrates, for example,

missionary work where certain individuals carry out the actual task on the Field but are supported by the whole company of believers back home. It is the church expressing itself while at the same time discharging its responsibility.

So, Paul and Barnabas embarked on their first deliberate missionary journey to Cyprus and Asia Minor. But why there? Possibly because it is where they were familiar with it. After all it was Barnabas' home territory. Guidance is often doing the obvious or "*what comes naturally*".

At Paphos they encountered two very different characters: one a magician (possibly interested in power over others?) the other a proconsul interested in saving truth. While the one believed the message, (especially after Elymas was rebuked and blinded), the other was sorely punished through Paul's decisive action of rebuttal.

At Perga on the mainland John Mark left them. Why, exactly, we do not know, but it was held against him; his being deemed unreliable, for the second journey. (Yet, the difference between Paul's and Silas' attitude towards him subsequently highlights the complementary significance of different personalities in executing the work of God.)

Regardless of any hindrances, the two missionaries went on to Antioch in Pisidia where they – as was their first priority wherever they went – attended the synagogue and were invited to share a word of encouragement. Paul responded by outlining the Old Testament story showing how God had successively led His people from the Exodus release to the occupation of Canaan with a deliverer, judges, and kings. One of these kings was David "*a man after God's own heart*" from whom eventually came Jesus, the Messiah sent by God to His people. John the Baptist continued and confirmed this progression in the NT where he subsequently had the privilege of 'introducing' the Lord Jesus.

The recipients' response, however, was – as predicted – one of rejection and subsequent 'destruction' by crucifixion. God, however, raised Jesus from the dead and thus endorsed the fact that He was the messiah, the Saviour presented by the missionaries and one who forgave sins. This was the glorious message that was being shared with them – provided they did not reject him again.

Some, particularly the Jews, did reject him and the preaching that offered him as Saviour, being jealous of the experience of those who believed. For those believers, there was potential for those who accepted and went on to discover all that God would do.

Divided response – jealous Jews and willing believers – eventually led to a disclaimer from Paul and a turning to the Gentiles, thus opening the way to a further expansion of the church into these Gentile areas. Conscious of this, the disciples, full of the Holy Spirit, rejoiced in God and His purposes and saw the word of God spread.

But, what awaited them in their next port of call? We shall see next week.

Chapter 14

Strengthened with that “joy” and the “Holy Spirit” Paul and Barnabas pressed on to the next town where, interestingly enough, the initiative and driving force seems to have been transferred from Barnabas to Paul. This would reflect the nature of the context and the needs of the situation.

Barnabas was called “the encourager”. He would appear gentle, very concerned for people and perceptive in initially seeking out Paul from Tarsus to become involved in what was to become the work of mission. It was a valuable contribution. Now, however, that the mission was under way and opposition encountered on a daily basis Paul, and his more fearless, forthright, personality, comes to the fore. There is no evidence of fallout, only recognition of difference – something that was to emerge more strongly in future. Thus emboldened, they entered Iconium, the next town, and reasoned in the synagogue powerfully persuading (something that Paul was much taken up in doing) with the result that there were many converts, both Jews and Gentiles.

Opposition was strong, however. Why is there such strong antipathy to Christianity not vented against other religions is hard to understand except that it may emphasise a subconscious awareness of the veracity and reality of the Christian gospel. The result of the opposition was a poisoning effect on the minds of those who were inclined to believe by those who deliberately refused to do so. It led to a plot to stone Paul who, learning of it, escaped.

That escape was not back home but an advance to the next town, Lystra, deeper into Asia Minor.

At Lystra, a lame man was healed with the result that both Paul and Barnabas were hailed as ‘gods’ possessing magical powers and became themselves objects of popular ‘idol worship’. Both Paul and Barnabas took immediate steps to thwart such an action stressing that they were only human but had a message of salvation to impart.

By this time the opposition mob had come from Antioch and Iconium, stoned Paul and left him for dead. However, surrounded by the believers he recovered and pressed on – not home, but to the next town, Derbe, where he continued earnestly with his gospel preaching and teaching.

The Lystra episode highlights two approaches Satan can use to destroy the work of God. Persecution in the form of stoning (or an equivalent) is obvious enough but temptation (it happened to Jesus in the wilderness) to succumb to praise and self-glorification is more subtle but equally dangerous. Sadly, not a few have fallen by that wayside.

Had Paul called it a day at Derbe in the light of the horrendous adverse experiences he had been subjected to and returned home would not be surprising. But, he did not. He and

Barnabas re-visited these hostile centres for the sake of the believers there and the young churches they comprised. While doing that they made sure that they '*strengthened the believers*', '*encouraged the saints*' and established recognised leadership in order that these churches would grow, thrive and be cared for.

Finally they returned to Antioch, the church from which they had been commissioned, in order to give an account of all that had happened. The stories featured two missionaries and their exploits but the narrative included the whole church of which they were a key – but only a – part. Accountability is essential in any work of God. It is the body – the company of commissioned 'witnesses' - expressing itself and working in harmony even though differences and challenges emerge.

How they dealt with these will be seen in our next study.

Chapter 15

Against a background of happiness and rejoicing that the missionary journey had gone so well (opposition attacks seem to have been ignored) suddenly a deputation appeared from the Judean (the Jerusalem) church who insisted that circumcision should be enjoined on all believers as a requirement for salvation. This was to present a message of 'gospel plus' – and a major challenge.

Recognising the danger in that diversion, Paul and Barnabas withstood it strongly but it initiated a concern among the Antioch believers. There was no immediate answer for it clearly was an issue that would surface again. So, they sent a delegation to Jerusalem to meet there with the apostles and elders who proceeded to take considerable time debating the issue and examining it carefully. It is assumed that in that lengthy debate many perceptions were put forward and each considered sensitively. From that discussion there emerged a clearer understanding vocalised at first by Peter and then by James. Neither, it seems, held position of explicit authority but each was recognised as speaking the mind of God which was readily accepted by the others. In James' contribution it was backed by Scripture.

Significant lessons emerge from an episode of this kind.

In the first place the believers willingly and readily faced a challenge, considering it carefully rather than reacting and acting prejudicially. Where error was clear (such as imposing an extra condition on Gentiles) it was immediately rebuffed but the general atmosphere was for them to reflect and understand what was being said and what implications it might have. There are reasons for the adoption of practices held dear from culture and tradition. But when these are imposed as essentials, without any proper basis for people outwith that tradition then they become unbearable and unnecessary burdens.

Considering such issues takes time and thorough treatment. All the leaders were free to contribute and inject their experiences as examples of discerning what God was doing or saying. But, the decision was theirs. There was no “Thus saith the Lord” only their discernment of where the truth lay.

That was facilitated by an open mind recognising what was being revealed to individuals. When Peter spoke and then James, recognising the importance of what he said by way of summary there was a general acceptance and recognition that this was God revealing himself to them. So much of sound church practice is based on “*understanding what the will of the Lord is*” expressed in conclusion – interpreting the evidence.

That led to an outcome. The issue was not to score points but to provide guidance: to help these believers how to live and behave in “*this present evil world*”. It is God’s way for he will “*not allow you to be tempted above what you are able but will ... provide a way of escape*”. God is always redemptive: His people should also be redemptive.

Another feature of this episode is the absence of any recrimination, blame or rancour. It is God’s way of establishing unity – not uniformity.

When the guidance letter was delivered by the hands of Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas it was warmly and appreciatively received and served both to encourage and strengthen the believers in their life

With that issue settled, the Antioch emissaries returned home with Paul and Barnabas continuing to teach and strengthen the Christians there. While doing that, it was natural, given Paul and Barnabas’ pastoral hearts, to propose re-visiting these new converts and young churches. Both missionaries agreed on that. But, when it came to practical arrangements differences arose. Barnabas, being “*the son of encouragement*” wanted to give John Mark (who had deserted them in Pamphylia) a second chance. Paul, on the other hand would have none of it. They disagreed strongly but apparently did not quarrel nor is there anything said about who was right and who was wrong. They simply recognised the fact of difference (differences that could, no doubt, be satisfactorily explained if not resolved) and agreed to separate.

That has implications for us today. God’s work is carried on by different people in divergent ways that appear incompatible. In such instances it is good to remember the words of Jesus to the complaining Peter, “*What is that to thee: follow thou me*”.

Throughout this chapter the absence of rancour, blaming and recrimination in the context of differences is remarkable and salutary. It is God’s way of establishing unity and effectiveness when each member of the one body acts in different ways in pursuit of the single objective.

What happened to Barnabas and John Marc is not recorded but Paul and Silas' trip to revisit the churches is, with interesting unforeseen variations. We'll see next time.

Before that, it might be profitable to take two other reflective looks at the significant Chapter 15, one summarising, the other classifying issues.

Personal Reflection on Acts 15

During this study Margaret Baird, one of the regular members provided the following reflection on Chapter 15.

Sometimes people say that they would have liked to live in the days of the early church, but I think Acts shows us that they had many problems to overcome. Some perhaps because they didn't have all the Scripture we do but also, though they had the Holy Spirit, they were still finding their way in the new Covenant.

The Jews were very aware of being God's people and circumcision was a sign of that. Under the old covenant, if Gentiles wanted to take part in the Passover they had to be circumcised. (Exodus 14). I think this led to their thinking that Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved: part of the new covenant.

The Pharisee converts in Jerusalem were even more insistent that the Gentile converts should not only be circumcised but should also obey the Law of Moses. We see from the gospels that the Pharisees were bound by many rules and regulations and perhaps found it hard to let go of their past and find true freedom in Christ.

There is a danger today that some churches preach 'Jesus plus'. They say we need to do or experience something more to be truly saved.

The apostles and elders met to discuss the issue and after a long discussion didn't seem to have got anywhere. Unfortunately there are times when Christians can be as intransigent as anyone else. It was Peter who took the lead to bring some agreement to the issue. He recounted how God had called him to preach to the Gentiles, and that when they believed, they received the Holy Spirit just as the Jews had done. They had been cleansed by faith so why try and tie them up with rules and regulations the Jews could not bear. They didn't fully understand their history.

God promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him. Abraham was counted as righteous because of his faith before circumcision became a sign for God's people. The law was given to teach and protect them until God's promise was fulfilled in Jesus, when righteousness would come by faith in Him. (Paul explains it better in Romans 4).

James then spoke reminding the group that the prophets had predicted the conversion of the Gentiles.

It is important for us to know Scripture too, it helps us know God better and protects us from false teaching if we know what the Bible really says.

Delegates were sent with Paul and Barnabas to deliver the letter from the apostles to the church in Antioch. The letter starts with the apostles distancing themselves from those who advocated circumcision. They had come to an agreement and to add authority to the letter they sent official representatives and “our beloved Paul and Barnabas who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

There are many today who know that when they decide to follow Jesus they are risking their lives. Like many early Christians they experience terrible persecution.

There were three requirements for the Gentile Christians – to abstain from food offered to idols, from consuming blood and the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.

Our society has become more tolerant of sexual immorality but for Christians, Paul reminds us in 1 Cor 6 that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit who lives in us- who was given by God. We are not our own, we were bought with a high price so we should honour God with our bodies.

What about food offered to idols? The nearest we have is Halal meat as we are not always told that it is and there is a religious ritual to the killing. Paul in 1 Cor 8 says that as idols are not real gods then there is no reason to refuse to eat but for some this would be a problem so freedom should always be tempered by consideration for the conscience of others.

Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch till Paul suggested that they revisit the places they had preached in to strengthen the believers. Paul wanted to take John Mark but Paul was having none of it because John Mark had deserted them before. It became a sharp disagreement and they went their separate ways, Paul taking Silas with him. Even the best of Christians can make mistakes.

At the end of Colossians, Paul talks of Mark, Barnabas's cousin, asking them to make him welcome. I hope Paul and Barnabas were reconciled

When Paul and Silas left, the believers entrusted them to the Lord's gracious care. Did they do the same for Barnabas and John Mark? I hope so.

Paul continued his work of encouraging the churches. We all need teaching to be encouraged and built up in our faith. In countries where God's word is not available in the people's mother tongue, Christian growth can be stunted and it is a lot easier for false teaching to take hold.

Chapter 15 re-visited

Chapter 15 is a key chapter in the Book of Acts. Coming at the half way stage, as it were, it highlights a number of the challenges that the early church encountered and, more

importantly, shows how they dealt with them. It might be worth enumerating some of the main topics.

Connection and Accountability

The point they have reached is one where the first missionary journey, the first deliberate attempt to “*preach the gospel in all the world*”, had been completed by the two emissaries entrusted with that task. They had gone out on behalf of the church. Of all the many believers, these two had the task of being the missionaries. Yet, they were part of the wider body that had been commissioned. In that sense they belonged to the others but were the special instruments charged with carrying out the task. That is an important lesson for the church to learn: members do different things but we are all in it together.

That also means that there should be accountability. Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch (an active, but not the main, church) to report on how they had got on during the journeys and what issues had arisen. Accountability, being subject to one another, and under authority, is so important for the health of Christian work, especially the kind of authority exercised by this group.

However, there were some sticking points when some people raised secondary issues.

Secondary Issues

Very quickly, some devout Judaisers appeared at the debriefing and advocated – indeed insisted – that any Gentile believer should submit to circumcision. Paul and Barnabas immediately refuted this as a case of secondary issues being raised – however sincerely held – as an addition to the basic gospel requirements. In order to ensure proper treatment of the matter beyond instinctive reaction, a delegation was sent up to Jerusalem to consult with the more experienced believers there. To seek advice on key issues is also an important lesson.

Conferencing

At Jerusalem, the apostles and elders met to consider the matter at great length. They devoted much time to the matter: there was no rush, only diligence.

In the protracted discussion and debate (debate suggesting the airing of divergent views) several took part, some of whose contribution is recorded in the chapter. Peter spoke first, then Paul and Barnabas reported on their experience – no doubt interspersed with questions and comments – and then James rose up to conclude.

Talking about issues, looking at them from different perspectives, (without rancour as far as can be seen even though views were strongly held) is valuable. It is not the first time they had talked together but this was of critical importance. Malachi records that “*they that feared the Lord spake oft with one another*”,

Certain features emerge in that conferencing.

Revelation and Recognition: Testimony and Fellowship

Elsewhere and later in his ministry Paul emphasises the importance of revelation and insight. He prayed that the Ephesians “*might see*”. God speaks into situations by revelation. God’s truth is not natural knowledge: it needs to be imparted. And a feature of the early church is that God reveals his truth – or aspects of it – to one and another. Their responsibility is to share that (not necessarily in formal, prescribed situations but also in general sharing). That sharing is testimony. And, the purpose of that sharing is that others might receive and believe it so that, having benefitted from the teaching, they might share fellowship at that level. For that to happen, there needs to be recognition that what is being shared is “of God”. There was an acceptance that the contributions being made were “of God” and given accepting reception and were a cause of rejoicing.

Guidance

The dominant positive motivation was not to score points but to encourage healthy growth. That is seen in the decision to record their findings and issue guidance which was then distributed to all the churches as a help for them to become more effective witnesses.

Chapter 16 Second Missionary Journey

After the Jerusalem Council and its momentous decisions and recommendations, it seems that both Paul and Barnabas wanted to go back and see how the converts and churches from the first visit were getting on. In the event they separated, with Barnabas going to his native Cyprus and Paul back to Cilicia where he came from and where they had been on the first journey. It was a brave action to go back to Lystra where he had been left for dead, yet worth it to find a thriving church and a young man - Timothy - who later became a companion. Here, Paul took an unusual step in ensuring that Timothy (a half-Greek / Jew) was circumcised even though the official line was: no obligation. Yet, Paul took this step to prevent misunderstanding and causing unnecessary offence.

Proceeding from there it seemed natural to advance into other parts of Asia as was their initial inclination but, finding no peace or assurance – indeed clear prohibition in some instances – they found themselves in Troas where Paul saw in a vision a man inviting him to “*Come over to Macedonia and help us*”.

This incident is an important lesson in guidance. Normally, it is: do the obvious, what comes naturally, but if it is different from that, then God will make that plain in no uncertain terms. Recognising that distinct ‘call’, however, was not simply a private response, for it involved discussion resulting in the group ‘concluding’, coming to a shared understanding.

The outcome from that call also meant that the gospel advanced in the West rather than migrate eastwards. Who can understand why?

Landing in the Macedonian city of Philippi – a Roman colony - Paul and his companions' (Luke having joined them now) natural port of call was not the synagogue (there probably was not one there because of Roman prohibition) but the riverside “place of prayer” where Lydia was brought to faith (as with the Eunuch and Cornelius, sincerity was not enough: there had to be belief in the truth) and she and her household were baptised and became key members of the church there.

Subsequently, a demon possessed slave girl recognised who and what they were and spoke out, declaring them to be emissaries of the gospel. After several days of this unwelcome attention, Paul cast out the evil spirit and effectively ended the girl's functioning as a source of income for the local businessmen. That led to secular, not religious, persecution and mistreatment resulting in imprisonment.

Paul and Silas' reaction was to sing praises in prison – a fact that the other prisoners and jailor quickly became aware of - so that, when an earthquake struck the prison, the inmates and captor cried out. The jailor's cry was significant when he asked what he should do to be saved. When the unequivocal answer came - *Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ* – he was converted and, with his household, was publicly baptised.

Following that incident, the authorities were forced into confessing that they had mistreated Paul – a Roman citizen, God using his natural credentials to confound the secular leaders of a lesser kingdom. -

Thus, through these strange events a thriving church came into being in Philippi where they were '*citizens of heaven*' and its whole ethos as well as being Roman citizens. That church continued in partnership with Paul throughout his ministry, making him proud of them and constantly praying for their healthy growth. Our Epistle to the Philippians reflects that close relationship and contains many helpful truths and insights.

We'll take a break from our itinerary and reflect on some of the teaching in the letter he sent them from his captivity in Rome.

Philippians

It was decided for this session to share thoughts on the Epistle to the Philippians, written by Paul at the end of his earthly ministry.

In introducing it Janice mentioned four emphases captured in four titles:

- The **joy** in living for Christ (1: 21)
- The **joy** in serving Christ (2:3-4, 14)
- The **joy** in knowing Christ (3: 8)
- The **joy** in resting in Christ (4: 6)

It would appear that there had been little direct interaction between Paul and this now thriving church but it meant much to him. Remembering its beginning through providential – even miraculous - events, he is thankful for them and their partnership and is now writing, looking back, expressing his confidence that *“He who began a good work in you will see it to its completion”*. With that in mind he prays that their love may grow and that they will continue to discover and experience that which is excellent.

Where he is concerned, outwardly things have not been so good as he has faced opposition and misunderstanding, etc. Nevertheless what has happened has turned out to be positive. Even though the motive has not always been pure, Christ has been exalted and that is what matters. For him, life is Christ-centred.

The Philippians will face similar difficulties but they, too, will need to live in a manner worthy of the gospel. They need to stand firm even though suffering will be part of their experience.

There is comfort, however, if they live in the proper manner and adopt the attitude of the Lord Jesus who willingly endured such humiliation and was rewarded with a victorious resurrection. By so doing they need to *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”* knowing that it is God working through them to fulfil his purpose. As they behave similarly, without self-centred attitudes, they will shine as stars - represent another way of living – in a world that is alien. Timothy and Epaphroditus have been sent to help them.

This new life of theirs is a privilege. They should rejoice in it and at the same time beware of people he referred to as ‘dogs’ meaning people who claimed virtue through their own attainments. Paul had more and better credentials than any of them but decided to forget the past and press on to know more. They should imitate him, realising that they are ‘citizens of heaven’ living the life of another realm though domiciled in this one.

They were to “stand firm” and let other people encounter their “moderation” or “reasonableness” – the fact that they lived their Christian life ‘moderated’ by what they knew of the kingdom and purpose of God. Should that mean difficulties then they were to be free to pray and experience the accompanying peace of God in these situations; all the while demonstrating the fruit of the spirit as they set their hearts on things which are above.

When Paul left Philippi at the end of his first visit it was with some trepidation yet he had grounds to believe – and eventually experience – that the work would continue *“until the day of Jesus Christ”*.

Meanwhile the next port of call would be Thessalonica.

Chapter 17

From Philippi, Paul and Silas move on through smaller towns until they come to Thessalonica where he spends three weeks in the synagogue reasoning with the Jews that it was necessary – and clearly foretold in the OT – for Jesus, as the Messiah, to suffer and be raised again. It persuaded some, but others became jealous and reported Justus, the host, to the authorities inciting a riot in the process so that Paul was secreted to Berea.

In Berea his reception was a better one. He continued with sharing his message to a receptive audience who, nevertheless, searched the Scriptures for themselves to verify the message. As in Thessalonica, several (influential) people believed, both Jews and Gentiles. The news activated the Thessalonian jealousy so that the persecutors came to Berea also. Paul was escorted by 'the brothers' to Athens leaving Timothy and Silas to be of help.

Athens was different: a city of culture and the epitome of its learning and wisdom. Yet, the sight of so many idols moved Paul deeply.

Starting in the synagogue, he soon found himself in the market place attracting attention to his "strange teaching" but resulting in an invitation to share these views with the debating gathering on the Areopagus.

Making good use of the opportunity, he recognised their spirituality and religiosity evidenced in the abundance of altars he came across in the city. One, in particular caught his attention for it was entitled "*To the unknown God*". This was Paul's cue. He claimed he could make Him known to them.

Focusing on the Creator-ness of God he pointed out that He did not live in temples nor needed to be sustained by human effort. Rather He is the source of life, the creator of all humanity, who owe their life to him and are indeed his offspring, thus recognising the spiritual dimension in every human being even though historically they had totally ignored this basic truth.

God, however, would ignore that ignorance but commanded them to repent and accept that their life was dependent on how they received God's offer of salvation centred in the man Christ Jesus (who would die and be raised again) as the criterion by which they would be judged.

Mention of the resurrection brought scorn but some wanted time to reflect further. Yet, some believed including Dionysius - himself a member of the Areopagus – and Damaris.

In the discussion which accompanied this study several lessons emerged.

- The main motive of those who opposed Paul was **jealousy**. This new teaching – based on Scripture as it was – it meant them losing their privileged status of being the "chosen race" (or rather the structure and procedures they had built around it) and submitting to Another. That principle of jealousy can still be dominant today in all kinds of ways in Christian circles.

- Paul’s starting point was invariably the synagogue where people already had an interest, even if not the light.
- His approach was a gentle one – persuading – but always on the basis of Scripture.
- His attitude to them was empathetic. He did not rant or be harsh but recognised seeking souls, whatever the context.
- His message, however, was always the same: that Jesus was the Messiah. It was the recurring message from the day of Pentecost and the first witnessing.
- We were reminded of the fact that the world in which we are to be witnesses is a godless one with generations having abandoned any knowledge of Scripture or of Christian mores and practices.
- How to address such situations was exemplified by Paul when he adapted his approach to suit the varying contexts where he was operating. In Corinthians he explains that he has “*become all things to all men*” in order to communicate his message effectively.
- Admirable though that contextualisation might be, he has resolved when coming to Corinth to know nothing among you save “*Jesus Christ and Him crucified*” citing that God uses the base things of the world to confound the things that are wise.
- Despite opposition and indifference, there is evidence of some folk believing, resulting in groups of believers in each of those centres. There is encouragement that God’s word will not return to him void.

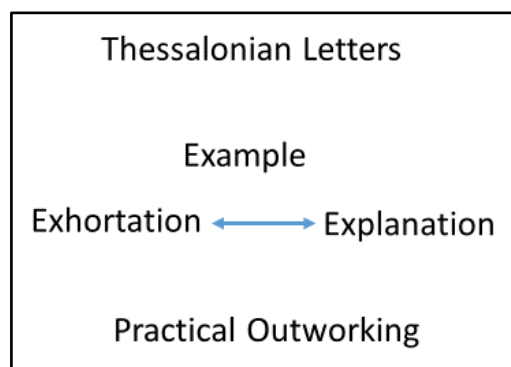
One of those churches is Thessalonica to which he wrote at least two letters while they were still finding their way. We shall look at those epistles next week.

The Thessalonian Letters

Paul’s second missionary journey took him from Macedonia down to Corinth in Achaia through opposition in Berea and quizzical scepticism in Athens. His mind was taken up with how the fledgling church in Thessalonica, where his stay had been cut short by Jewish opposition, was faring in such adverse conditions. So he wrote to them to encourage them to stand firm.

He need not have feared for the news he got was very positive. They had not only accepted the word of God but had “*turned to God from idols to serve the living God and to wait for His Son from heaven*”. There was every reason to thank God for their “*work of faith, labour of love and patience of hope*” so much so that their testimony was a model which had resounded around the area.

Just as they were an example, so was his involvement with them. He had shared the gospel with them – not from impure motives such as greed – but out of love and concern. He had



been gentle and caring like a father towards children. He had not been a burden to them but was burdened for them. Timothy was sent to see how they were doing and reported positively, reinforcing Paul's thankfulness for their exemplar testimony.

Yet, if they were to "*stand firm*" they needed help in knowing what to do and how to continue living their new life. So, he encouraged them with exhortation, teaching and instruction to live a life that was pleasing to God by pursuing holiness and becoming more sanctified in their being and behaviour, living a 'quiet life' characterised by moderation – controlling behaviour in the light of guiding principles learned from the Word of God; for doctrine is not intended to be only objective knowledge but guiding truth. (*Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet...*).

To help them keep things in perspective he explains salient features of the second coming, what happens to 'the dead in Christ' and the order of proceedings.

He also reminds them that the climate in which they are developing is a hostile one: suffering is a constant to Christian testimony so they need to '*stand firm*'. Such exhortation and explanations are intended to encourage them (rather than become ends in themselves such as imbalanced preoccupation with details of the Second Coming).

Informed by these realities they have a responsibility to conduct themselves in distinctive ways which entails doing some things and deliberately not doing others. Not surprisingly, these are very positive and practical.

In summary, their present endeavours are commended warmly but need to be maintained diligently. Some of their contemporaries are at risk of getting things out of proportion (such as becoming idle and lazy in the light of the expectation of the imminent return of Christ). They, however, need to acknowledge good leadership and example, exercise their own discipline and moderation and, above all, to **stand firm**.

Practical outworking 1

Do's

- Warn the idle
- Encourage the disheartened
- Rejoice always
- Pray continually
- Give thanks
- Test and hold on to good

Don'ts

- Pay back wrong for wrong
- Quench the Spirit
- Treat prophecies with contempt,
- Give in to evil
- Associate with idle believers

Confirming the sense of partnership that was highlighted in Paul's relationship with the Philippians, they are asked to continue that active involvement by responding positively to the request to "*pray for us*".

What he would encounter and experience in Corinth, the next stop on his journey, we shall see next week.

Acts 18

Moving from Athens to Corinth was to prove a real shock for Paul. While Athens was happy to discuss philosophical viewpoints and was intrigued by any new teaching Corinth, was known as a “cesspool of iniquity” no doubt deriving from its position as a cosmopolitan city full of different traders from a wide range of cultures.

Interestingly enough (clearly evidence of the providence of God) Aquila and Priscilla moved there at the same time but for different reasons. But, while there Paul was able to stay and work alongside them fulfilling his boast to the Thessalonians that he worked with his own hands and not be a burden to anyone, the coming of Silas and Timothy (presumably with a gift from other churches such as Philippi) he was able to concentrate on reason and preaching.

Two important principles emerge here. On the one hand (and reinforced later in the Apollos episode) the significance of God’s strategic placing of people in critical situations. What was true of the ram in the thicket” in Abraham’s day or Philip and the eunuch in Acts, was also true in this instance reflecting the question posed to Esther “Art thou come into the kingdom for such a time as this?”

It also illustrates the issue of the funding of Christian service. The basic assumption is both DIY and support yourself so as to make the gospel –and other aspects of Christian ministry – free of charge. But corporate responsibility is the share in that responsibility and finance the worker to concentrate fully on the work God has called them to do. In his letters Paul makes frequent references to being ‘supported’ in this way.

Intensity in ministry, however, attracted much opposition so much so that Paul (as Jesus had told His disciples) shook the dust of unbelieving, violently opposed, Jews from his feet and made us of fresh opportunity in Titius Justus’ house next door where Crispus and his household and others were converted.

It was at this point that Paul was assured by God in a vision that he should not only stay but continue to preach in the city for God foreknew that He had many people in the city; and that in so doing he would be protected from harm. It must have been reassuring for Paul to have this confirmation that he was where God wanted him to be. Each of us should seek that assurance of knowing that we are where God wants us to be and doing what God wants us to do.

That assurance given to Paul did not prevent the crowd and the opposing Jews from plotting against Paul. Gallio would have none of it thus thwarting their intentions. God moves in a mysterious way.

With his ministry at Corinth at an end (although he visited on two other occasions and corresponded four times) Paul made his way back to 'headquarters'. Aquila and Priscilla went with him to Ephesus and stayed while Paul went on to Syria promising to return one day. Syria meant going back to Caesarea, then to Jerusalem and subsequently to Antioch – his sending church, presumably to report on what had been happening and practising stewardship accountability.

From there he launched out, on his own, without Silas, to the familiar territory of Galatian and Phrygia to strengthen the believers. Paul was not a hit and run missionary. He practised deep care for the churches. This was the beginning of his Third Missionary Journey.

Meanwhile, migration had brought Apollos to Ephesus. There his knowledge of the Scripture and his eloquence stood him out.

There was a flaw, however, for something in his early experience was incomplete. The 'gospel' he had responded to and was now espousing was "the baptism of John" which taught repentance but had not yet expanded to proclaim Christ crucified. It was not an error but an inadequacy which was picked up and dealt with by Aquila and Priscilla – again strategically placed and used for a specific purpose.

Corrected, Apollos went on to Achaia and proved a real help to the churches there.

But, before we scoot off on the Third Journey it might be worth looking at the Corinthian correspondence and learn a little more of that context, the issues that were raised (or not raised) and Paul's handling of them. We will do that next time.

The Corinthian Letters

Paul not only stayed in Corinth for quite a long time, assured that the Lord had his people there, but also wrote several letters to them. One of the reasons for that level of correspondence interspersed with visits (one of them 'painful') was the fact that the Corinthian context was a difficult one and one which was not conducive to healthy Christian growth. That difficulty arose partly from opposition but its main source was their immaturity and inadequate appreciation of what being a Christian implied and what source of strength it offered.

Not that they were unaware of challenges. Indeed, this letter is occasioned by a list of questions from the Corinthians as to what they should do in relation to what they saw as real issues: things like eating meat offered to idols, or the relative order and practise of 'spiritual gifts'. The messengers who conveyed that list provided Paul with more information so that ironically the problems they were unaware of far exceeded the ones that they did identify in importance and potential for damage. In turn, they became the chief topics Paul dealt with in both the letters although his approach to doing so differed between the early first letter and the later one.

While individual contributions during the study focused on such aspects as: the importance of Jesus, the inability of the world to appreciate spiritual revelation and warfare, and the living force of the word of God, Manuel - who led this study - grouped the material into three main sections.

The first of these focused on God's work in redemption, reconciling the world unto himself and transforming people who trusted and were committed to Him.

The second emphasised God's character and highlighted the way he works and brings things into being. That is through weakness demonstrating that the spiritual, though despised, is actually very potent. God's way triumphs over sin and death, overcomes human frailty, and employs weapons that are supernaturally powerful, etc.

That being so, it has critical implications for behaviour and conduct. Accepting weakness and being despised, it should inspire confidence in what lies ahead. Based on a sound foundation it encourages building on it with durable materials and surviving any test or challenge. In a context where the apparent, popular and superficial held such a place gaining from the corrective work of God the Father, Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit was so much better. Love is the "greatest of these" and is both enduring and comprehensive. It is the best motivation.

The two letters also represent a progression. In the first one Paul is concerned with giving instruction, as in the case of procedure for Communion or for practising 'tongues'. By the second letter he is more interested in their understanding as a motivator of behaviour drawing on his own deep experience to reinforce its application.

Essentially, he is dealing with 'worldly' believers, influenced by "thing in this life only", encouraging them to grasp the spiritual and everlasting based on the fact that truth does not change.

And, as that 'worldly' environment dominated the climate of that age so does it surround us today. Yet truth does not change: it is as relevant and potent today as it ever was. It is also everlasting and future oriented. Maranatha!

That Paul had to visit Corinth so many times and wrote to them so often over and above his initial visit shows that this church's "growing pains" were serious and incessant. However, he had already decided to return to Antioch and Jerusalem to report and was now embarked on his Third Missionary Journey landing in Ephesus (as promised) and developed a fruitful link with that city from which he wrote to the Corinthians.

Our next step is to visit Acts 19 and the story of his experience in Ephesus.

31.03.2023

APPENDIX 1

Stimulated by a similar Bible Study on another occasion the late John Kerr, one of the leading Elders in the Church of God, produced the following reflection on the issue of corporate decision-making and setting policy and practice. Here it is:

Reflections on The Jerusalem Conference.

Is Acts: 15 a pattern for today?

Following our Wednesday morning study of Acts 15 and the helpful notes issued, I decided to look again at this important chapter. Previously in a Christian magazine I had read an article entitled 'Chairman James' in which the author set out the importance and necessary qualifications of a good Chairman and how these qualities were used to good effect at the leaders' conference described in Acts 15. The article showed how much of the success of that conference was due to Chairman James's wise leadership. Reading it stimulated my interest again and with our study increasing my attention further, I looked at the necessity of using a conference as a means of maintaining unity among churches in fellowship with each other. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and The Elders' Conference of some Brethren Fellowships would be examples. So, let us look at the Acts 15 Jerusalem conference once again to find out if it can be used as a pattern for today.

For many years, I have personally seen the value of leaders coming together in conference, whether on a local, geographical, national or wider level. While the world today is so different from the one the Apostles lived in, the principle is surely the same, i.e. there must be a means by which some unity of practice and teaching is maintained. After all, that was what the Acts 15 conference was all about. What I want to do now is to look mainly at this chapter and some other relevant passages to understand and reflect whether such conferences are justified from Scripture.

Coming now to the story line in Acts 15, which is reasonably straightforward, it will be worth noting some things as we move along. The chapter begins with contention: Jews verses Gentiles; and ends with a different contention: namely Paul verses Barnabas. In the first case, some disciples who held very strong views, (no doubt Jews who had been converted to Christianity from Judaism) came down from Jerusalem and disputed doctrinally with those present who held that the gospel for Gentiles did not require elements of the Law of Moses to be applied to them for salvation. In the second case the dispute was a personal matter over principles of practice.

Coming back to the first contention, these who came down, called Judaizers, are sometimes criticised for their attitude. Yet, surely it is reasonable for persons who all their life had been taught to adhere to the teachings of Moses for acceptance with God, to want to retain the principal rite of the Jewish religion, i.e. circumcision. Paul and Barnabas were teaching the Christian religion on the basis that previous Mosaic ceremonies had ceased, so inevitably a dispute arose. For Paul and Barnabas to defend the faith, e.g. as in Philippians 1:17 where Paul states that he is set for the defence of the gospel, they must insist on upholding what was revealed to them by the Holy Spirit. When any leaders are in serious contention with false teachers, boldness in contending for the faith is required; but so also is humility, discernment and divine knowledge, which in our case is the Scriptures.

In this incident, if the dispute had been unresolved, it would have done terrible damage to the developing church so, wisely, representatives from the churches affected were chosen, commissioned and sent to Jerusalem for a decision. These Judaizing teachers were facing

what to them were major changes. When we face change we all need an attitude of willing subjection to enable unity to continue. Personally, for over 50 years, I have seen this attitude of subjecting one to another and all having an attitude of humility, and recognising others as better than ourselves (Phil2:3). Seeing it in practice, I am convinced that it has been a major contribution to the success of such conferences. When those selected to go up to Jerusalem, including those who came down from Judea, were willing to go along with the proposal to consult the leaders at Jerusalem, it shows that at least they recognised the matter had to be resolved corporately. We may assume that those holding a contrary view would have believed Paul and Barnabas to be wrong. By agreeing to go back to leaders at Jerusalem they would possibly think that the decision would go in their own favour, for clearly they felt confident about their own Godly traditions.

As in New Testament times, so down through the centuries, there always have been those who want to add to the basic simplicity of the gospel message, so even today we must be ready to uphold the truth of the gospel, namely 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.' Eph. 2:8, with other scriptures in support. When we face any kind of challenges in the churches over serious problems these surely must be addressed immediately or else all that is going to happen is division, or ultimately a split. This cannot be what God wants: it is a bad testimony to unbelievers. In Acts 15 the matter was entrusted to suitable men in whom others had confidence, this latter requirement being important also.

Coming back to the timeline, if this journey to Jerusalem was possibly 14 years after Paul's conversion (and could be the one referred to in Galatians 2:1) he was by then well-established as an apostle, especially having completed one missionary journey. Although we learn that Titus was one of their companions, he is not referred to in chapter 15 so possibly another visit is referred to in Galatians. On arrival it seems that the group were well received by the church in a friendly manner yet obviously there were still some in Jerusalem holding firmly to the need for those coming to faith to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. The group was well received by the church in a friendly manner is clear because of the statements in v2 and v7, that there was much contention. If these had gained their way, the result would have produced a wrong addition to the gospel, contrary to the clear apostolic revelation that salvation was by faith alone.

It appears that this conference was convened for Apostles and Elders alone, the purpose being for leaders to review the facts and to confirm God's will. The main points emphasised appear to begin with Peter's clear example of how the Holy Spirit made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles in the requirement for either coming to faith. Although the example Peter gave happened much earlier it was appropriate to use it. It was the first clear case of Gentile conversion being that of Cornelius and his family and was a valid input to the Conference discussion which none could gainsay. Barnabas and Paul then corroborate by reporting their experience of Gentile conversions, so that was a double confirmation.

Coming back to the timeline of chapter 15 it appears that the events described in verses 6-21 could have happened over a few days and explains that when Barnabas and Paul gave their account it is inferred that the whole church was present. In support, the words used 'all the multitude' would hardly apply to the apostles and elders alone and there is no reason why the apostles' report could not be repeated to the whole church as well as to the leaders' while in conference. When a good chairman accurately sums up the general tone of the conference, others recognise the mind of the Spirit and readily accept the decision. This is what happened in Acts 15 when James the chairman, the brother of the Lord, gave his

opinion. It is reasonable to assume that the conference was probably convened in several sessions, so after considerable discussion James summed up the matter, confirming it with a quote from the Old Testament scriptures (Amos 9:11-12). Finding a supporting scripture is a very important part of the decision-making process.

The agreed conclusion is then conveyed in person as well as by letter, which is important to confirm that the letter was genuine. The letter also acknowledges the Judaizers' error (they were not authorised to teach) and gives clear guidance with minimum requirement. We can easily see how this encouraged the believers who received the letter and gave them great joy. So, when we face challenges like these in the churches today, any problem has to be addressed quickly and, as in Acts 15, entrusted to suitable men in whom others have confidence. It seems wise that we copy the decision-making procedure which they used. What would be the alternative?

Only a few churches raised the problem, but the concluding decision reached was conveyed in writing to all churches in a wide area for standard application throughout. This is important and confirms that the churches were in a fellowship, all teaching the same thing. Other scriptures (1 Cor. 4:17, 7:17) confirm the intention that all churches teach the same thing so for this to apply today there must be something that corresponds to the Acts chapter 15 conference. For leaders from churches in a fellowship that teaches and practises uniformly, surely it is acceptable that they meet and resolve issues and then communicate the result to all churches. For any churches further afield, that did not receive the letter, the itinerating apostles would communicate the content in their teaching wherever they went. This maintained uniformity of doctrine and practice then, and should be similarly applied today, and additionally supported by modern communication which now is so much better. So far, we have considered the doctrinal conflict and what I believe was the correct way to resolve it but what about the personal dispute at the end of the Chapter? Here Paul and Barnabas have a disagreement about the choice of a personal assistant but at least they did not appear to fall out. Their solution was easily resolved, Paul took Silas and Barnabas took John Mark. The lessons from this chapter remind us that it is important that we learn how to disagree and be in subjection to one another, resolve difficult personal issues and maintain true love and harmony with each other in fellowship.

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