



## The Acts of the Apostles

### Acts 13-15: Holding the Church Together

With the conversion of Saul/Paul and the action of the Holy Spirit in making gentile converts in Caesarea, and with the church, now called “Christian,” established in Antioch, the work of expanding the gentile mission now begins in earnest. The process continues with the commissioning of Barnabas and Saul, in what comes to be known as Paul’s “first missionary journey.” The itinerary takes them from Syrian Antioch, to Cyprus, to the southern coast of Asia Minor, from which they make a trek up-country to Pisidia, then eventually back to Antioch. Amid many adventures, Paul makes the first of his many speeches in Acts.

Paul and Barnabas land in Cyprus (13:4-12), where, in the presence of the Roman governor, the proconsul Sergius Paulus, they confront a magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus/Elymas. Paul denounces him and renders him temporarily blind (13:11), impressing the pro-consul, who comes to believe.

Paul and Barnabas then sail to Perga in Pamphilia but move on immediately to Antioch in Pisidia. As is their custom in Acts, they first enter the Jewish synagogue, are invited to offer a guest homily, and provide a mini-version of the account of salvation history that we already heard from Stephen in Acts 7. The story culminates in the coming of Jesus, the descendant of David, whose execution by Pilate is blamed on the Jewish leaders (13:28). As usual in Acts, the Romans are portrayed as, at worst, reluctant pawns in Jewish efforts to persecute Christians.

Paul’s positive proclamation of the Gospel focuses on Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, interpreted through citations from the Old Testament – Psalm 2:7 in v 33; Isaiah 55:3 in v 34 and Psalm 16:10 in v 35. The significance of Christ’s resurrection is expressed, as is typical of Luke, with the theme of the forgiveness of sins (13:39). The sermon ends with a solemn warning not to reject the message, citing Habakkuk 1:5.

The sermon is a fine example of Lukan rhetoric. It is interesting to compare this speech with the themes of Paul’s preaching. We do not, and will hardly ever in Acts, hear any of the positions for which Paul is duly famous, that all are saved by God’s grace, appropriated in a faithful response that imitates and enshrines the “faith of Jesus Christ.” Jesus is the focus of belief in Luke, but with a different nuance from what we find in Paul.

The synagogue homily evokes a hostile response from the local Jewish community (13:44-52), which eventually leads the apostles to shake the dust of Antioch off their feet (13:51) and move on to Iconium. But before they do, they have the opportunity to cite scripture one more time

(13:47), finding in Isaiah 49:6 an encapsulation of their mission, to be “a light for the gentiles” to “bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” Here Luke probably has it just right. Although Paul does not cite this text of Isaiah in his own letters, it is quite likely that the vision of universal outreach found in Second Isaiah shaped his understanding of his role and that of the communities that he founded.

More adventure awaits – rejection, again fostered by Jewish opposition, in Iconium (14:1-7), and then acceptance of a sort in Lystra and Derbe (14:8-20), where the locals greet the preaching apostles in their own language as deities, Zeus and Hermes (14:12). The reaction of these “country bumpkins” contrasts with that of the sophisticated philosophers in Athens in chapter 17. Both groups appropriate the gospel message through a cultural lens that can distort its meaning.

After their stint in the highlands of Lycaonia, Paul and Barnabas make the circuit of cities they have visited, appointing elders (14:23), before they return to Antioch to report on the success of their efforts (14:24-28). The organization of local communities around “elders” probably reflects the general organizational structure of the Church in Luke’s day toward the end of the first century, when singular bishops were not yet the dominant force (Cf. also 20:18-25).

Following the “first missionary journey” an event occurs that is very important for Luke’s narrative of the growth and development of Christianity from its Jewish roots to a movement that embraced the Gentile world, a council of leading apostles in Jerusalem. We also know of this event from Paul’s letter to the Galatians 2:1-10. Both accounts attest to the importance of the decisions made at this council, although they have slightly different versions of the decisions that were made.

The presenting issue was the demand by some believers that Gentile converts to the movement be circumcised (15:1), a point on which the accounts in Acts and Galatians agree. Paul and Barnabas represented the church in Antioch (15:2) to a meeting in Jerusalem to discuss the issue, where the character of the opposition appears: believers who were Pharisees insistent on the importance of keeping the Mosaic Law (15:5). Two apostles rise to defend the position that circumcision need not be imposed on Gentile converts. Peter, claiming to be the apostle to the Gentiles (15:7, contrast Galatians 2:7-8) evokes the episode recounted in Acts 10, where the Holy Spirit took the lead in bringing Gentiles aboard (15:7-11). More elaborately, James, the brother of Jesus, who apparently played a leading role in the Jerusalem community as both Paul and the Jewish historian Josephus relate, takes the floor (15:13-31). He speaks in favor of accepting uncircumcised Gentiles into the movement, relying on Amos 9:11-12 to support his position (15:16-17).

So far, Luke and Paul’s account in Galatians 2 generally agree. The leading apostles accepted the possibility of admitting Gentiles without requiring that they be circumcised. Paul’s account goes on to tell of later developments back in Antioch, from which it becomes clear that the agreement left some other issues undecided (Galatians 2:11-14). The situation as Paul describes it is that dispute continued over the issue of whether Jews and Gentiles could eat together without observing the Jewish food laws or laws of kashrut. Peter sided with the faction including “men from James” that required observance of such laws and was famously criticized

by Paul in a way that inspired the reformers of the sixteenth century. So, the Jerusalem Council did not decide, to put the matter in anachronistic terms, whether ham sandwiches and shrimp cocktail could be served at church picnics. Paul thought Gentiles should be accommodated and fully welcomed as Gentiles, and Peter thought that they should defer to the sensibilities of their Jewish brethren.

Luke's version of events does not suggest that there was room for such disputes. After reporting on the speeches of Peter and James, he goes on to provide the text of the formal decision of the Council, something we don't find in Paul's account. The wording of the decision uses the language at home in the formal legal decrees of Greek city states (15:25, "we have decided," 15:28 "it seemed good..."), and it claims the guidance of the Holy Spirit in making the decision (15:28). The content of the decision is, in its core the same as what Paul's account implies: circumcision is not required of Gentiles, but it adds stipulations that introduce some minimal attention to kashrut. Believers must avoid "food sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled" as well as basic moral law, "and from fornication" (15:29).

Luke reports briefly on the joyous reception of the decree in Antioch (15:30- 35) and on the split between Paul and Barnabas, over what appears to be a personnel issue (15:37). Paul, in Galatians 2:13, also indicated a rift between himself and Barnabas, although he connects it to the issue of observance of kashrut. That Paul and Barnabas parted company is clear. Luke, desiring to portray the early community as much as possible as a harmonious whole, probably does not want to attribute that disagreement to a matter of principle.

With the decision of the council of Jerusalem in place, the stage is set for Paul's expanding mission in the heart of the Greek world.