

Learn to Read Acts Effectively

Distance Learning Programme

Session 8

Session 8

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Session 8 - A major problem in the church, and further preaching Acts 15 and 16

Introduction

We have seen how the Jews repeatedly opposed Paul's message, because they were very reluctant to abandon the laws and customs that they were used to. In this session we see that the same problem occurred in the church and caused trouble. But, in the way we have seen before, the preaching work continued and the gospel message was spread further by Paul on his second missionary journey. You can follow this journey on Map 5 in the *Additional Notes* booklet.

It will be helpful to read Acts 15 and 16 before you look at the notes.

Summary

The church spreads through the Roman Empire

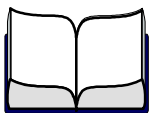
Problems as the church spreads

Conflict over circumcision	15 v 1 to 5
The Jerusalem conference	15 v 6 to 21
The Jerusalem agreement	15 v 22 to 29
Preaching in Syria	15 v 30 to 35

Paul's second missionary journey

Division over John Mark	15 v 36 to 41
The call to Macedonia	16 v 1 to 10
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Acts 15 v 1 to 5 - Conflict over circumcision



Read Acts 15 v 1 to 5

Acts 15 v 1 And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Here we see a problem in the church at Antioch.

Look at the references and you will see where we first meet the principle of circumcision and how it was incorporated into the law of Moses:

X-Refs-
Acts 15
v 1

Genesis 17 v 10; Leviticus 12 v 3.

Circumcision was a national covenant between God and the Jewish people. This covenant or agreement was that they would be God's people and He would be their God, as Genesis 17 v 7 and 8 tells us. The law of Moses, which God gave the Jews, did not say that non-Jews could not be saved; in fact, as we have seen in Session 5, page 9, there are hints given that non-Jews would be included in God's plan.

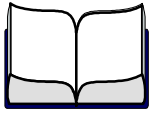
Because there was strong feeling on the subject, the decision was made, verse 2, to go to Jerusalem and talk about the problem. As we saw earlier, in Session 4, page 2, this was the method Jesus recommended as a way of solving disputes.

Acts 15 v 2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

It is interesting to note from this verse that there was no specific guidance given by the Holy Spirit on this question. This would indicate that they only had God's power at certain times when God chose.

Verses 3 and 4 detail the journey of Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem via Phoenicia and Samaria. On their way they related the stories of the conversion of the Gentiles (non-Jews). They would possibly mention that the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and his household, who were non-Jews. The Holy Spirit had also been used recently to heal the lame man at Lystra, a sign which was supporting the preaching to non-Jews. So God was giving His blessing to this work. But verse 5 tells us that some Jews were still insistent that the Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, despite the evidence of God's support to the contrary.

Acts 15 v 6 to 21 - The Jerusalem conference



Read Acts 15 v 6 to 21

Verse 6 tells us that the apostles and elders gathered together to talk about this problem.

Acts 15 v 7 And when there had been much dispute ...



What is meant by "dispute"?



Look at *Strong's* definition of "disputing" on page 14.

Strong's Concordance tells us that this was a "reasoning" "mutual questioning" or "discussion". There would appear to have been a desire to resolve the problem.

In the remaining part of the verse, Peter reminded the conference that God chose him to be the one to give the gospel message to some of the first non-Jews, Cornelius and his household. (We looked at this in Session 6.)

Verses 8 to 11 record the rest of Peter's argument:

- God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles as well as to Jews (v 8)
- Both Jews and Gentiles can now be saved by faith (v 9)
- The Jews could not keep the law of Moses, so why should the Jews expect Gentiles to keep it? (v 10)
- Both Jews and Gentiles will be saved through the grace of Jesus Christ (v 11)

Acts 15 v 11 "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

Peter is emphasising that both Jews and Gentiles are saved through grace.

The cross-references show us more about God's plan of salvation:

Have a look at the cross-references and see what you can learn about God's plan of salvation.
Compare your findings with the notes on page 13.

X-Refs-
Acts 15
v 11



Romans 3 v 21 to 24; 6 v 23; Galatians 2 v 16; Ephesians 1 v 6 and 7; 2 v 7 to 9.

Both Jewish and Gentile believers believed that Jesus could save them from death. The difference was that the Jews also kept the law of Moses, which involved circumcision, and insisted that the Gentiles should do the same.

In verse 12 Paul and Barnabas told the assembly how God had approved the preaching to the Gentiles by working "miracles and wonders" through them.

Acts 15 v 13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me"

The references help us to identify James:

X-Refs-
Acts 15
v 13



Acts 12 v 17; 21 v 18; Galatians 1 v 18 and 19; 2 v 9; James 1 v 1.

- Peter asked for news to be sent to "James and the brethren" as though James was the main person among the brethren
- Paul went to James and the elders - again James was seen to be the main person in the group
- Paul told the Galatian believers that the only apostle he saw at that time, other than Peter, was James, Jesus' brother
- James, Cephas (Peter) and John are listed as being "pillars", or leaders
- It would seem likely that it was the same "James, the Lord's brother" who wrote the letter of James

Acts 15 v 14 "Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name."

James summarised Simon Peter's work of being the first to preach to non-Jews as God taking out of the Gentiles a people for His name.

We looked at the significance of God's name in session 2, page 2. There are interesting echoes relating to this idea of God having a people for His name:

Echoes -
A people for
God's name

2 Samuel 7 v 23 to 26; Daniel 9 v 16 to 19; Micah 4 v 2 and 5.

- God made Israel to be a people for his name when he brought them out of Egypt, and the other nations saw what He had done for them
- Daniel pleaded for God to act because God's name was associated with both Jerusalem, which was then desolate, and with His people Israel, who were in exile at that time
- Micah tells us that eventually many nations will walk in the name of God, meaning that they will obey and respect God and His commands

God's name is His character and what He stands for.

Peter was relating the way in which God was selecting Gentiles who would respect His reputation and live by His principles.

In verse 15, James was saying that this was just what the prophets predicted would happen. Verses 16 and 17 of Acts 15 are a quotation from Amos 9 v 11 and 12.

*Acts 15 v 17 'So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name,
Says the Lord who does all these things.'*

We have seen how the Jews were involved in God's name; the quotation from Amos in verse 17 shows how God prophesied that the Gentiles were to be involved as well.

Notice how James used the authority of Scripture in his argument:

- The Old Testament predicted that non-Jews would be included in God's plan, and God's purpose could not be overturned
- The Old Testament prophecies were therefore being fulfilled and could not be argued against

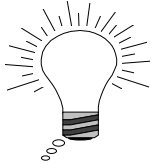
The Scriptures were regarded as the ultimate authority:

Have a look at these echoes and see what you learn from them.
Compare your findings with the notes on page 13.

Echoes -
Authority and
power of
Scripture

→ Psalm 19 v 7 to 11; 119 v 9 and 11; 2 Timothy 3 v 16 and 17.

We can see that the Scriptures are the source of our information about God and what He wants us to do.



Like the early church, we should regard the Scripture as the ultimate authority.

Acts 15 v 18 "Known to God from eternity are all His works."

James commented that God has known His plan from the start of time. The cross-references remind us that the God of Israel is unique in being able to have a master plan for the whole world and make it happen.

Have a look at the cross-references and see what you can learn.
Compare your findings with the notes on page 13.

X-Refs-
Acts 15
v 18

→ Numbers 23 v 19; Isaiah 44 v 7; 46 v 9 and 10; Ephesians 1 v 4;
2 Thessalonians 2 v 13.

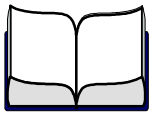
Acts 15 v 19 "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God"

James argued that God had approved Gentiles who were not keeping the law, so the Jews should not insist on conditions that God did not require.

Acts 15 v 20 "but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood."

James then suggested that the Gentile believers should keep away from things connected with pagan worship. This would assure the Jewish believers that the Gentile believers had really forsaken their old pagan ways.

Acts 15 v 22 to 29 - The Jerusalem agreement



Read Acts 15 v 22 to 29

These verses record the letter written from the whole church at Jerusalem to the Gentile believers in Antioch and the surrounding area.

The letter tells in a caring and considerate way what had been agreed:

- The Jewish believers should accept Gentile believers because the Old Testament predicted that Gentiles would be part of God's plan. Gentile believers should not be expected to keep Jewish laws
- The Gentile believers for their part should assure the Jewish believers that they had completely forsaken paganism by keeping away from things connected with pagan worship

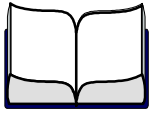
Acts 15 v 30 to 35 - Preaching in Syria



Read Acts 15 v 30 to 35

Paul and Barnabas travelled back to Antioch with Judas and Silas, bringing with them the letter from the Jerusalem church. The believers in Syria were much encouraged by this message.

Acts 15 v 36 to 41 - Division over John Mark



Read Acts 15 v 36 to 41

This passage marks the start of Paul's second missionary journey. Paul suggested to Barnabas in verse 36 that they go back and see how the new churches were getting on.

Verse 37 tells us that Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them.

X-Ref-
Acts
15 v 37

Colossians 4 v 10.

We learn that Mark was a relative of Barnabas, so it was natural for him to choose Mark.

Acts 15 v 38 But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work.

X-Ref-
Acts
15 v 38

Acts 13 v 13.

Paul however, had other ideas. He remembered the incident that the cross-reference takes us to, when Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. He possibly thought he would do the same again. So we can see that Barnabas may have wanted John Mark because he was a relative, but Paul doubted his "staying power".

Acts 15 v 39 Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus

This is one of those incidents which is comforting to us all. We tend to regard men like Paul and Barnabas as being somewhat remote and on a far higher plane than the rest of us. But this section shows that they had arguments and disagreements just like us. It is also interesting to note that the breach was eventually healed, as references from verse 37 to 2 Timothy 4 v 11 and Philemon 24 indicate.

The cross-references from this verse lead us to other informative passages:

X-Refs-
Acts 15
v 39

Acts 6 v 1; 15 v 2; Romans 7 v 18 to 21; James 3 v 2.

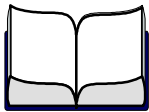
- There are two other strong disagreements recorded in the Acts
- Paul echoes what we all feel at times - that it is difficult to control our sinful nature
- James tells us that we all say things that would be better left unsaid



It is comforting to know that the characters of Scripture all had their weaknesses.

Acts 16 v 1 to 10 - The call to Macedonia

Have a look at Map 5 on page 3 of the *Additional Notes* as you read the following sections.



Read Acts 16 v 1 to 5

In this section we read that Paul travelled to Derbe and Lystra, where he met Timothy, who had a Jewish mother and a Greek father.

Acts 16 v 3 Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek.

A cross-reference from this verse helps us understand why Paul circumcised Timothy when the Jerusalem council had recently agreed that such action was not necessary:

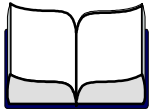
X-Ref-
Acts 16
v 3

1 Corinthians 9 v 20 to 23.

- Paul accommodated other people's views to avoid offence so that he could preach to them and, hopefully, give them the hope of eternal life

Acts 16 v 4 And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem.

In this verse we see Paul doing all he could to encourage the Gentile believers by telling them of the decision of the Jerusalem conference that they were not obliged to keep the law of Moses. We see that Paul wanted to preach to both Jews and Gentiles and therefore accommodated the traditions of the Jews but did not impose them on the Gentiles.



Read Acts 16 v 6 to 10



Paul and Timothy proposed to go to preach in Asia and then in Bithynia, but they were forbidden both times. Paul was then directed, in a vision, to go to Macedonia. Notice that we are not told **how** the Holy Spirit communicated with them. They then went to Macedonia as directed and came to Philippi, as we shall see in the next section. This was the first preaching of the gospel in Europe.

*Macedonian
Coin*

Acts 16 v 11 to 40 - Events at Philippi



Read Acts 16 v 11 to 40

Acts 16 v 13 And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there.

Maybe there was no synagogue in Philippi to go to, so Paul went to a public place where he would meet people. "Prayer was customarily made" down by the riverside, so by going there Paul chose the best place to meet God-fearing citizens. Among these women was Lydia, who listened to Paul and believed what he preached.

Acts 16 v 15 And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." So she persuaded us.

Here we see the familiar pattern of baptism following belief and understanding of the Scriptures.

Verses 16 to 24 relate how Paul healed a girl who made her masters rich by fortune-telling. Not surprisingly, her masters were upset, and Paul and Silas ended up in prison.

Acts 16 v 25 But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

Paul and Silas had similar faith to that of Peter which we saw in Chapter 12 v 6 (Session 6, page 11). Peter had sufficient trust in God to allow him to sleep in prison; Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns.

Verses 26 to 29 tell of the earthquake which opened all the prison doors and set the prisoners free. Paul prevented the keeper of the prison from killing himself. The keeper probably knew something of the background of Paul and of his healing of the girl who told fortunes. This was enough to convince him that Paul had a message worth hearing. So he took Paul and Silas to his home and begged them to tell him of God's plan of salvation.

Acts 16 v 32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized.

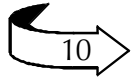
Yet again we see that baptism followed belief and understanding of God's message.

The final part of the chapter relates how Paul and Silas were released from prison. Paul reminded the magistrates that he was a Roman, which meant that he had the privilege of being a Roman citizen. By declaring his Roman citizenship, and getting the magistrates to come and apologise, Paul was ensuring that it was public knowledge that he and Silas had done no wrong. The teachings of Christianity were not subversive, and its preachers were not law-breakers. He also ensured that the members of the new church at Philippi would not be arrested. On this occasion he did not use this privilege of Roman citizenship to spare himself a beating. We shall see that Paul did use this privilege later on.

In our next session, we shall see the message taken even further afield.

The letter to the Philippians

It is uncertain when Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians. References in chapter 1 v 7 to 13 to his “bonds” or “chains” and to the “palace” may indicate he was writing from prison in Rome. The letter encourages believers in difficult circumstances to think and act like Christ.



Despite his own problems, Paul gave very useful encouragement and guidance which are relevant in all periods of history. Have a look at the *Additional Notes* for more information on this very helpful letter.

Summary of Session 8

We have seen how the first-century church dealt with differences of opinion:

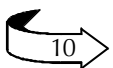
- They were willing to talk about a problem with a desire to find a solution
- They used Scripture as the authority
- They allowed differences of opinion that did not conflict with Scripture

We have seen some more beliefs of the early church:

- Eternal life will be a gift from God
- We can only be right with God by having faith in His purpose and plan
- The God of Israel is unique in being able to have a master plan for the whole world and have the power to make it happen

We have also seen that:

- The members of the early church were just like us in having disagreements and arguments
- Paul did all that he could to accommodate people’s views so that he could preach to them
- The Holy Spirit continued to guide the work of preaching
- There were further examples of baptism following belief and understanding of God’s message



The letter to the Philippians

We are again challenged:



- Is Scripture our only authority?
- Do we have the faith to put our trust in the God of Israel, Who has a master plan for our world and the power to make it happen?

Questions

1. How should we deal with disagreements?
2. Where should our authority come from?
3. How is the God of Israel different from all other gods?
4. How can we be right with God?

Self-study notes

God's plan of salvation (page 3)

- Jews and Gentiles alike all sin but are made right with God (righteous) through faith in Jesus and his redeeming work, by the grace of God (Romans 3 v 21 to 24)
- If we receive what we deserve, we will die. But eternal life is a gift from God through Jesus Christ (Romans 6 v 23)
- We can be made right with God (justified) through faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 2 v 16)
- We have forgiveness of sins through Jesus' sacrifice (Ephesians 1 v 6 and 7)
- The future hope of [salvation through] God's kindness is a gift of God because of our faith. We cannot earn [it by doing works] God's salvation (Ephesians 2 v 7 to 9)

The authority of Scripture (page 6)

- God's laws are:
 - * perfect (or complete) and sure (or reliable)
 - * right and pure (or clean)
 - * true and righteous
 - * much more valuable than money (Psalm 19 v 7 to 10)
- If we keep God's laws we have a hope of reward (Psalm 19 v 11)
- Young people can avoid pitfalls by listening to God's law (Psalm 119 v 9)
- We can avoid rebelling against God by remembering His word (Psalm 119 v 11)
- Scripture is invaluable in helping us to go in God's ways (2 Timothy 3 v 16 and 17)

Cross-references from Acts 15 v 18 (page 6)

- Once God has spoken, what He has said cannot fail to happen (Numbers 23 v 19)
- Only the God of Israel can predict the future because only He has the power to control events (Isaiah 44 v 7; 46 v 9 and 10)
- God knows all those who will respond and have faith in His plan to His plan and remain faithful (Ephesians 1 v 4; 2 Thessalonians 2 v 13)

Strong's Concordance definition

Disputing

4803 **suzetesis** (sood-zay'-tay-sis)

from *4802*;

mutual questioning, i.e. *discussion*:

disputation (-ting), reasoning.

Notes

Notes

