



# LifeLight

*"In Him was life, and that life was the light of men." John 1:4*

## Acts, Part 2



### LEADERS GUIDE

**P**risilla pulled taut each stitch along the edge of the tent. She worked the bone needle through the rough goat's-hair cloth again and again. As she sewed, she thought about the challenges her family faced in their new home. Because her husband was Jewish, they were expelled from Rome (Acts 18:3). Because they were Christians, they were not welcome at the synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:5–7). "It's like life for the children of Israel in the wilderness," she thought. "Always wandering; life in a tent; awaiting the Promised Land."



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Earl H. Gaulke, editor

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## Introduction

### Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

### LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

*In-depth* means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

### LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

### LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

#### The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

#### The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

#### The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 7.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;
- prepares worship activities (devotional thought, hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
- encourages prayer at weekly leadership team and discussion leaders meetings.

**The Small-Group Coordinator (*optional; the director may fill this role*)**

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership team and discussion leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

**The Small-Group Discussion Leaders**

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. **(Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 55.)** There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than 12 participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session;
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;

- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;
- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;
- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion leaders training meetings.

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**Leadership Training**

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week’s work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week’s lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

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**The LifeLight Weekly Schedule**

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week’s assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of 12 or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week’s

study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week. Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another five minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). A congregation may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process will begin all over again!

## Recommended Study Resources for Acts

*The Lutheran Study Bible*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009. This resource contains more than 26,000 study and application notes, a thorough reference guide, and more than 90,000 cross-references, as well as a 31,000-entry concordance, maps, charts, and timelines.

*Lutheran Bible Companion*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014. This new resource is a highly visual two-volume handbook that welcomes Christians to a deeper exploration of the cultural and historical contexts of the events captured in Scripture and the Apocrypha.

*Reformation Heritage Bible Commentary: Acts*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, coming 2016. This new Bible commentary series is a powerful tool for those wanting to better understand the background information on authorship, history, settings, and themes of the Gospel. Features the ESV and KJV side by side with quotes from key reformers.

## A Step toward World Evangelization (Paul's First Mission Journey)

### Acts 13–14

#### *Preparing for the Session*

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#### Central Focus

The Holy Spirit calls Paul and Barnabas to take the Gospel into Asia Minor, as the Gospel continues to move from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

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#### Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit, will

1. possess a more complete understanding of how the Holy Spirit caused the Gospel to be spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth;
  2. become more confident in their own witness of the Gospel to others;
  3. be encouraged as they see and experience conflicts among "erring and faithful" Christians;
  4. be better able to meet and respond to opposition to the Gospel;
  5. praise God for the growth of the church.
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**Note for the small-group leaders:** Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 55.

#### *Session Plan*

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#### Worship

Each week the study leaflet will suggest that participants experiment with a prayer posture. Encourage participants to use that posture each day as they study their lessons at home, and then open the large group session with the same posture. This week explain that folded hands can serve two purposes: It may simply keep our hands from doing other things so we can focus on our prayer. Or it may (also) serve as a symbol, either of helplessness or some other quality. This week partici-

pants are urged to think of the joined fingers as the union between the Vine and the branches.

Read John 15:1–8. Then read together the prayer from the study leaflet, or speak a prayer of your own. Introduce the hymn "God, Whose Almighty Word" by pointing to this phrase in stanza 1, "hear us, we humbly pray," and connecting it to the theme of Study 1.

Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *Every Voice a Song*, a 9-CD set of organ accompaniments for 180 hymns and liturgy. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 6.

#### Devotion (optional)

Has the thought ever crossed your mind that God wanted you to take the Gospel to someone? Perhaps this was or is someone near at hand—someone you know at work or a neighbor, an acquaintance, perhaps even someone in your own family. Has the thought ever crossed your mind that God wanted you to take the Gospel to someone like that?

God calls upon all Christians to witness to others, to share the Good News that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting our sins against us. We fulfill this calling right where we are—at our places of employment, in our neighborhoods, within our families. God gives us the power to make such a witness, and He uses and blesses the witness we give. While we often fail to give a clear witness, the Lord forgives us and gives us opportunities to try again.

All Christians are to be the Lord's witnesses where they are. But some Christians God calls to leave their surroundings to take the Gospel to people far away. In our lesson this week we read of how the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas for this work. The Holy Spirit still calls such missionaries—those who are sent by God to far-off places with the Gospel. Those of us whom God has not called for this particular work still, however, have a part in their ministry. We support such missionaries with our prayers and with our gifts. We may be certain that the congregation at Antioch upheld Paul

and Barnabas in their prayers all the while these two members of their church were absent doing the work for which the Holy Spirit had called them. We also will want to remember in our prayers those whom God has called to take the Gospel to every area of the world, and we will want to support them with our financial gifts through our congregation and church body. And as they fulfill their calling, we will fulfill our calling to be witnesses for Jesus in our own setting.

## Lecture Presentation

### Introduction

In the first half of the Book of Acts Luke reported the birth of the Christian church at Pentecost, the confrontations between priestly authorities in Jerusalem and the apostles, the stoning of Stephen, the persecution by Saul of Tarsus and his subsequent conversion, and Peter's mission activities in Palestine. The second half of Acts focuses in fascinating detail on the life, adventures, and ministry of the now-converted Saul, who would one day be called St. Paul. This is the stirring account of how a faith born in the hills of Judea would penetrate the imperial capital of Rome 1,500 miles away in an incredibly brief period of time.

### 1 The First Mission Target: Cyprus (13:1–12)

Antioch was the capital of Syria, the Roman province just north of Palestine, and it became a vigorous seedbed for a growing church. Both Jews and Gentiles were converted to Christianity, and it was here that Jesus' followers largely abandoned their bulky title, "Followers of the Way," and took on the name by which they would be known ever afterwards: "Christians" (11:26). One of the early leaders in the church at Antioch was Barnabas, a sturdy, imposing Jew from Cyprus who had helped introduce the converted Saul to the Christian leadership in Jerusalem (9:27).

Sensing the need for more church workers in Antioch, Barnabas took the road that wound around the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean to Tarsus, 80 miles away, where he found his friend Saul and returned with him to Antioch. This sets the stage for what would become the first specifically organized missionary expedition in church history, the first of the tours that aimed

to plant the flag of the faith in the very heart of paganism in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), then Greece, and finally Rome.

Verse 2—It was probably in A.D. 47 that the Spirit told praying believers in Antioch, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." They were selected from quite a field of candidates, including Manaen, a courtier and friend of Herod Antipas (the ruler of Galilee during the ministry of Jesus) who had converted to Christianity.

Verse 3—It was a trio that embarked on ship from the port of Seleucia near Antioch. Barnabas had invited his cousin, John Mark, to join the expedition. This was the future author of that brisk and probably earliest Gospel, Mark. Most likely they weighed anchor at the opening of the sailing season—about March 10—since strong westerlies blow later in the spring and their voyage would not have been so direct.

Verse 4—Their destination was Cyprus, the "Copper Island." The choice was hardly a mystery: this was Barnabas's homeland, where relatives were waiting to learn the Good News and where such personal contacts would assist the missionaries. Verses 5–6—Landing at the eastern port of Salamis, they traversed Cyprus until they reached Paphos on the west coast, the provincial capital of the island.

Verses 7–8—Cyprus was one of Rome's senatorial provinces, and at this time it was governed by a proconsul named Sergius Paulus. He himself met Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark and inquired about their mission. It was Saul who took the initiative, giving so eloquent a response that the Roman was quite impressed. But the governor, like many heads of state, also had clients, opportunists, and hangers-on at his headquarters, and one of them was a magician or sorcerer named Bar-Jesus. Worried that his influence over the governor might slip if he converted to Christianity, Bar-Jesus opposed Saul.

Verses 9–10—"You are a child of the devil!" snapped Saul, in some of the strongest language recorded from his lips. "Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?" The apostle was angry for two reasons: (1) Bar-Jesus (or Elymas, his Greek name) was interrupting what would possibly be Saul's first major Gentile conversion, at least the first we know of; and (2) as a Jew,

Bar-Jesus should not have been dabbling in the occult, especially since his name, meaning “son of Jesus,” could further have confused the governor, who was inquiring about Jesus, the Christ.

Verses 11–12—This man was a hindrance on all counts! Small wonder that God, through Saul, struck him with blindness, however temporary. This was the first recorded miracle from the hand of Saul, and it so impressed Sergius Paulus that he believed the apostolic message—a strategic conversion of a genuine historical personality. An inscription in Rome shows that L. Sergius Paulus was formerly a flood-control commissioner in that city.

In reporting this episode Luke inserts his famous shift in referring to the apostle by name in verse 9: “Then Saul, who was also called Paul.” And Paul he would be called from here on. “Paulus” was a similar-sounding name among Greeks and Romans, the targets of his mission.

## 2 Proclaiming the Good News in Pisidian Antioch (13:13–52)

Having accomplished their mission in Cyprus for the present, Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark took a ship from Paphos and sailed northwest to Perga on the southern coast of Asia Minor. Verse 13—There, however, the missionaries suffered a personal crisis: Young John Mark suddenly abandoned his colleagues and returned to Jerusalem—why is not stated in the New Testament. Was John Mark ill? homesick? indecisive? a tenderfoot? a slacker?

Very likely it was something else. When the trio had left Antioch, Barnabas was clearly in charge of the expedition as Paul’s original mentor. Yet, by the time they reached Cyprus, Paul had clearly taken over leadership of their mission tour. John Mark, as Barnabas’s cousin, may have resented what he thought to be a takeover of leadership by an “outsider” from such “insiders” as themselves, who had been charter members of the church.

Whatever the reason for John Mark’s defection, the apostles were obviously also human beings—a consolation for us today in any current church squabbles!

Verse 14—The initial goal of Paul and Barnabas’s thrust into Asia Minor was another city named Antioch, a hundred miles inland. Pisidian Antioch was a very cos-

mopolitan community, with Galatian, Phrygian, Greek, Jewish, and Roman inhabitants. A large influx of veterans from the Roman army had also recently settled there. Of all these ethnic groups, however, Paul and Barnabas would first proclaim the Good News to their own kind—a standard procedure used by Paul from now until the end of the Book of Acts.

They went into the synagogue at Antioch on the Sabbath and sat down. Verse 15—After the standard two Scripture readings, from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue invited them to address the congregation. Verses 16–41—Paul stood up to deliver a sermonette that could not more effectively have linked Jesus to scriptural prophecy. Like the martyred Stephen, he skimmed the highlights of Israel’s past (vv. 17–22), but when he reached King David he shifted directly to David’s messianic descendant. Jesus, said Paul, was prosecuted by the Jerusalem authorities because they failed to see scriptural prophecies fulfilled in Jesus. But rejection and death were followed by resurrection and new life not only in the case of Jesus, but also for all who believed.

Verse 42—Paul’s message about the Messiah who had finally arrived raised a sensation in the synagogue, and they were invited back for the next Sabbath. Verse 44—A week later, the word-of-mouth phenomenon had caused “almost the whole city” to turn out for the two missionaries.

Verses 45–47—This multitude, however, also included some representatives of Jewish orthodoxy who contradicted Paul’s claims. After what must obviously have been a heated debate, Paul finally grasped what would become his ready alternative whenever he was confronted by Jewish rejection of the Christian message. Ominously, he warned, “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”

There were more than enough Gentiles for a mission field in Antioch, with its crazy-quilt of different ethnic groups. It is possible, in fact, that Paul and Barnabas had originally aimed for Antioch on the recommendation of Sergius Paulus, because archaeology has shown that the family of the governor of Cyprus had roots in

that city. Verse 48—With only paganism as their religious foundation, the Gentiles of Antioch gave a positive response to the Christian message, and a congregation was founded there.

Verses 50–52—Unhappily, however, increasing pressures from the synagogue finally led to outright expulsion of the two missionaries. But before leaving Antioch, they had the satisfaction of seeing their new converts “filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” The wonder of Pentecost was continuing.

### 3 On to Iconium and Lystra (14:1–20)

Verse 1—Paul and Barnabas now headed eastward to Iconium (called Konya in modern Turkey), a city well situated on a fertile fruit-and-grain-producing plain. Here they pursued a mission pattern parallel to what they had undertaken in Antioch, preaching first in the Jewish synagogue of the city. Verse 3—Supernatural signs and wonders only added to the effectiveness of their message, with the result that “a great number” of both Jews and Gentiles converted. Yet here again, orthodox Jews challenged their success, which divided the city. Verse 6—Lest they be mistreated and even stoned, the apostles fled Iconium for Lystra. They had, though, this powerful consolation: the second church in Asia Minor had been founded, and it would thrive.

Verses 8–10—Lystra lay 25 miles south-southwest of Iconium, but, although a sister city to Antioch in boasting a colony of Roman army veterans, it was clearly more rural and less sophisticated, if the next extraordinary scene is any indication. After Paul and Barnabas arrived in town, Paul used a great sign to add credibility to his great message. Fixing his gaze on one of his listeners, a cripple from birth, he cried, “Stand up on your feet!” The cripple did just that and began walking.

Verse 11—The phenomenon was too much for the crowd that had gathered. Abandoning the Greek in which they and Paul had been communicating, they shouted, in their native Lycaonian tongue, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” Verse 12—And such gods! Barnabas they hailed as Zeus, father of the gods and men in Greek mythology; while Paul, the chief spokesperson, they called Hermes, the god of communication.

Because of these names, scholars have long assumed that Barnabas must have had the more imposing figure of the two, with Paul smaller and more vocal. In fact, *paulus* is a Latin adjective meaning “small” or “little.” But it was also a common proper name in several of the great families of Rome, whose bearers were anything but small. More convincing are the earliest portraits of Paul in the Roman catacombs, which often show him as a smallish figure with a pointed, gray beard.

The acclaim at Lystra was more than the sort of flattery given King Agrippa that fateful morning in Caesarea (12:21–23). Those were only words. Here the bedazzled pagans went on to action. The local priest of Zeus was so sure that the chief deity on Olympus had actually arrived in Lystra that he was preparing oxen and garlands to offer public sacrifice to the missionaries! Before we laugh at the naiveté of the Lystrans, it should be noted that it was in this area of the world that the famous Greek myth of Baucis and Philemon had its setting. Baucis and Philemon were an aged couple who one day supposedly offered hospitality to *Zeus and Hermes* as the two gods approached in the *likeness of men*, for which the couple’s miserable cottage was transformed into a splendid temple. Would lightning strike twice in the same area?

Verses 14–17—Paul and Barnabas instantly put an end to such speculation. Tearing their garments at the sacrilege, Paul cried, “Why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God,” whom he went on to describe.

Verse 19—Was it chagrin at their blunder that made the crowd lend their ready ears to adversaries, Jews who had just made a trip from Antioch and Iconium to denounce the apostles? A drastic change of mood swept the multitude. The “gods” were now seen as impostors who had to be punished. Before his supporters could save him, Paul was stoned and then dragged outside the city by a shrieking mob, who left him there for dead.

Verse 20—Actually, Paul had doubtless been knocked unconscious by one of the stones. When Barnabas and the new believers of Lystra gathered anxiously around him, Paul regained his senses and stood up, bruised but not mortally injured.

Any thoughts of self-pity could hardly have cluttered his mind, for he would have been the first to recall a man named Stephen, and how he was here receiving a slight taste of his own medicine.

## 4 Derbe and the Return (14:21–28)

Verses 21–23—The next day they left for Derbe, the final town on their itinerary, about a day’s journey eastward. Here they preached without incident and “won a large number of disciples,” the first place in Galatia where they had not encountered a determined opposition. Paul would visit Derbe again on his second mission journey, and one of its residents, Gaius, became Paul’s disciple and would accompany him on part of his third mission journey.

From Derbe it would have been easiest for Paul and Barnabas to continue eastward through the Taurus mountain pass and home to Antioch in Syria. But what was easiest was not always best for the Gospel. Since it was important to gauge the progress of the new missions they had founded, the two apostles went three times as far homeward in the opposite direction, bracing up the new believers in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, and appointing elders (pastors) to guide them. This prudent gesture led to permanent Christian churches in all these cities, some lasting until the time of the Turkish conquest in the fifteenth century.

Verses 26–28—The last three verses of Acts 14 show Luke’s meticulous concern with geographic accuracy, adding places like Perga and Attalia to his record of the apostles’ itinerary. All these sites have been identified today, and this adds compelling credibility to the entire account. Unlike almost all other religious systems, Christianity is based on hard fact, involving *real* people who lived and traveled in *real* places during a *real* segment of past history.

Upon reaching the Mediterranean coast, Paul and Barnabas caught a ship bound for Syria. When they finally returned to Antioch, they called the church together and gave what must have been an exciting and colorful mission report. It had not an ounce of self-credit or bragging, since God was given all the honor for having “opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.”

## Conclusion

Christianity’s first crucial step toward world evangelization had now taken place. That step was bold, deliberate, and courageous. It had involved great effort, inconvenience, embarrassment, hazards, and sacrifice. Still, Paul and Barnabas had found joy in the process, since through prayer and implicit faith they had sought the Holy Spirit’s guidance. God rewarded their venture with an eventual success that was extraordinary: Asia Minor became one of the strongest centers of Christianity in the critical first five centuries A.D. The conversion of the Mediterranean world was off to a splendid start.

Do one or two individuals make a difference? So often in life we tend to think that our one vote gets lost in an election, our local efforts to light a candle rather than curse the darkness are a futile gesture. At such times, we ought to remember Paul’s first mission journey, and how a lonesome pair of apostles—two versus many thousands—began to change the world for the better, despite being hopelessly outnumbered. Individuals do count in God’s sight! One person can change history!

## Concluding Activities

Speak a brief prayer, asking God’s blessing upon participants in this LifeLight course. Make any necessary announcements. Distribute study leaflet 2 and the enrichment magazine. Encourage participants to browse in the magazine and keep it as a helpful reference for coming lessons.

Encourage participants to set a weekly plan for their LifeLight study. A consistent daily schedule works best for most. Some begin or end the day with LifeLight. Others find another time during the day at home or during a break or lunch hour at work. Invite participants to share their practices, especially if your group has some who are new to LifeLight.

## Agreeing That All Nations Are Included (The Apostolic Council of Jerusalem)

### Acts 15

#### *Preparing for the Session*

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#### Central Focus

The assembled leaders of the church affirm and declare the fundamental principle of the Gospel that salvation is through faith in Christ alone, without keeping the laws of the old covenant.

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#### Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit, will

1. understand more clearly the Gospel principle that salvation is by faith in Christ alone, without the works of the Law;
  2. become more confident of salvation through faith alone;
  3. be unwayed by claims that they must do something besides trust in Christ to be saved;
  4. in Christian freedom and love avoid offending those who are weaker in faith or who are still under the burden of erring consciences.
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**Note for the small-group leaders:** Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 58.

#### *Session Plan*

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#### Worship

Comment on the prayer posture of holding hands while praying as a symbol of “agreeing together in prayer” and have the entire group hold hands as you read the Scripture (Matthew 18:19–20) and speak the prayer. Use either the prayer in the study leaflet or a prayer of your own. Do not ask the group to read since they need both hands to hold hands with others.

Continue with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *Every Voice a Song*, a 9-CD set of organ accompaniments for 180 hymns and liturgy. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It’s especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 6.

#### Devotion (optional)

“You would think that a church would be the last place where there would be arguments and disagreements. In the church, of all places, you would expect to find harmony, mutual consideration, love, and peace.”

Yes, you would. Until you remembered that the devil is trying his hardest to block and oppose the Gospel from doing its saving work. Until you remembered that the Gospel meets opposition as well as acceptance. Until you remembered that Christians are people who carry around throughout life on this earth their old sinful natures, as well as their new spiritual natures.

These considerations and others explain why the church is sometimes the scene of conflict and why forgiveness and reconciliation among Christians are sometimes necessary. Of course Christians strive for peace. They forgive one another when they are offended, and they are patient, bearing with one another. Christians avoid being contentious and argumentative. But there are times when Christians must resist the devil, contend for the faith, and even rebuke one another. There are times when love and harmony demand tenacity and toughness.

In our study this week we find such a situation. Finding such a situation, and others like it, in Scripture encourages us. We find that the Lord can and does see His church through conflict. We find that Christians can and do learn to forgive and reconcile. We find that we must sometimes stand up for the Gospel—sometimes for the sake of the very people we are opposing.

## Lecture Presentation

### Introduction

The most important church council ever held was not at Nicaea or Rome or Constantinople, but at Jerusalem—the event sandwiched in between Paul’s first and second mission journeys. But for the decisions of that gathering, Christianity might have become (humanly speaking) nothing more than a splintered offshoot of Judaism, a tiny sect rather than the world’s largest religious system, which outnumbers its mother Judaism by 100-to-1. The council debated this crucial question: Can Gentiles become Christians directly, or must they first become Jews? The rest of history hung on the answer.

### 1 How Does One Become a Christian? The Answer of the Judaizers (15:1–3)

A certain nostalgia for early Christianity and its rapid growth rate moves many believers today. If we could only get back to the dedication and vigor of the early church, they suggest, we could move mountains of indifference and win the world for Christ. Perhaps this is true. On the other hand, it is very easy to idealize the experiences of primitive Christianity, where all was hardly sweetness and light. Besides the spectacular extension of the church, Luke very candidly, very honestly also records the squabbles and quarreling that went on in early Christianity. (Incidentally, this also demonstrates the integrity and credibility of Luke as a historian, even if that was not his intention.)

After the sad affair of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11) and the complaining of the Jerusalem widows (6:1–6) came three shockers: (1) the bad, restrictive theology of Judaizing Christians that threatened to undermine everything Paul and Barnabas had accomplished; (2) the Paul versus Barnabas tiff in Antioch; and (3) the Paul versus Peter spat in the same city. First, the case of the Judaizers.

Among the Jerusalem Christians was a group of very strict interpreters of Jewish law—“the circumcision party” of Christian Pharisees who were later called Judaizers. A foretaste of their theology had surfaced when Peter returned from his mission to Cornelius, when they criticized him for dining with “uncircumcised men” (11:3). Though Peter’s reply satisfied them

for a time, the narrow-minded legalists now dispatched representatives to Antioch, who insisted that the only way a Gentile could become a Christian was to become a Jew first: 15:1—“Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” Despite the coming of Christ, they taught, the Old Testament Law in its entirety still applied to Christians.

Paul and Barnabas opposed this notion vigorously. In their journey through Asia Minor they had not required that their Gentile converts be circumcised or that they observe all of Jewish law, since salvation was attainable only through faith in Christ, not by fulfilling the Law. Quite a debate raged in the Antioch church, since the Judaizers were calling Paul and Barnabas’s whole mission enterprise into question.

Verse 2—The church at Antioch now sent Paul, Barnabas, and “some other believers” to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles on so basic an issue. These “other believers” included Titus, cited only in Galatians 2:1, who was one of Paul’s Greek converts, most probably from Antioch, and he had not been circumcised. In other words, here was a walking, breathing test case on the theological question: Was Titus a true Christian as he was, or would he have to undergo the Jewish rite of circumcision first?

Verse 3—En route to Jerusalem, Paul, Barnabas, and Titus did not miss the opportunity of reporting to believers in Phoenicia and Samaria the exciting news that even Gentiles were being converted to Christianity. Looking at this event from our twenty-first-century Gentile church, we miss the drama in the missionaries’ report today. If we understand a little about those days of Jewish exclusivism, however—when one rabbinical prayer ran: “I thank Thee, Lord, that I was not born a Gentile, an animal, or a woman”—we may better understand the sensation. Today it would be like our stunned reaction to news that former leaders of terrorism are turning to Christ.

### 2 How Does One Become a Christian? The Answers of Peter and Paul (15:4–12)

The meeting in Jerusalem was the first church council in Christian history, and its decision opened the way for Christianity to become a world religion, a universal

faith. The highest authorities in the Jerusalem church at this time were the apostles and elders who had gathered to debate the issue, with James (the half brother of Jesus), Peter, and John as the leading three “pillars of the church.”

Verse 4—Paul was warmly received by the Christian leadership, and opened by giving the assembly a sample of the sort of Gospel he and his colleagues had been preaching to the Gentiles, to make sure that he was not “running or had run my race in vain,” as he put it in his own letter to the Galatians (2:2). If he had preached a faulty version of the faith, his 15 years of study and missionizing would have been utterly wasted. Verse 5—Paul’s theology sat well with everyone but the Judaizers, who insisted adamantly, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.”

Verses 7–9—A drone of discussion greeted that opinion, until Simon Peter stood up and fully seconded Paul’s theology. The forthright fisherman reminded the council of how God had elected the Gentiles also, as witnessed by his own special mission to Cornelius (Acts 10). Verses 10–11—“Now then,” he summed up, “why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the [Gentile] disciples a yoke that neither we nor our [ancestors] have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” It was an astonishing admission: not even a good Jew could hope to fulfill the Law and find salvation in the process. Only divine grace could accomplish that.

Verse 12—During the resulting silence Paul and Barnabas reviewed how extraordinarily God had blessed their efforts in Asia Minor. Would He have given them the power to perform miracles there if they had been preaching a wrong gospel? Evidently, the Judaizers had no response to that argument. How, in fact, could they have responded? The logic was faultless.

### 3 How Does One Become a Christian? The Decision of James and the Council (15:13–34)

The person who apparently had the final authority at the conclave was James, Jesus’ half brother. (Note his statement in verse 19: “It is *my* judgment, therefore . . .”) We wish we knew far more about James, since what we do know is most intriguing. In the Gospels, he is the

first named among Jesus’ four half brothers, but during Jesus’ public ministry, he seems to have had qualms and concerns over Jesus’ activities. However, Jesus’ resurrection and special appearance to him (1 Corinthians 15:7) swept away all doubts and transformed James into the leader of the Jerusalem church. Later, he most probably wrote the epistle bearing his name, and we also know how he died, even though the New Testament does not tell us. Instead, the Jewish historian Josephus reports a confrontation between James and the Jewish Sanhedrin in A.D. 62 that bears a strong parallel to Good Friday: against the wishes of the Roman governor, James was stoned to death—another martyr for the faith. But this lay in the future.

Now, at least a dozen years earlier, James showed his leadership by bringing the Jerusalem council to a decision. He clearly sided with Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. Arming himself with Scripture, James announced that Peter’s activities with the Gentiles corresponded well with prophecies by Amos (9:11–12), Jeremiah (12:15), and Isaiah (45:21). 15:19–20—He said, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.”

Paul’s more liberal message, then, was God’s message! His preaching was authentic. He had not “run in vain”! Titus would not have to be circumcised, and Gentiles could now convert directly to Christianity without going through a kind of Jewish halfway house. The fourfold restrictions—three dietary and one moral—were very mild tokens asked of the Gentiles so as not to offend their fellow Jewish Christians.

The Jerusalem council had clearly opted for salvation by God’s grace through faith rather than salvation by Law, a momentous turn for the future of Christian theology. As Paul would later write to the new Christians in Galatia: “We did not give in to them [the Judaizers] for a moment, so that the truth of the Gospel might remain with you” (Galatians 2:5).

Verses 22–30—Paul’s victory was confirmed by a letter that the elders of the Jerusalem church wrote to the Gentile congregation in Antioch and surrounding areas. It was delivered by two special prophetic emissaries—Judas Barsabbas and Silas—who accompanied

Paul and Barnabas on the trip back to Antioch and who testified in their behalf for the freedom of the Gospel. The letter specifically stated that the Judaizers had had no apostolic instructions to trouble the believers there (v. 24), and the Christians of Antioch could not have been happier. No change in their beliefs was necessary. The Gospel of God's free grace in Christ was Good News indeed.

## 4 An Apostolic Argument at Antioch (15:35–41)

Verse 35—Because of Paul's evident success with the Gentiles, an almost official division of labor had been agreed upon at the close of the Jerusalem conclave: James, Peter, and John would concentrate primarily on the Jewish Christians, whereas Paul and Barnabas would specialize in Gentile mission work (Galatians 2:9). This may help explain the unhappy scene that followed soon after the council ended. Even though the squabble between Peter and Paul at Antioch is not reported in Acts but in Galatians, it *did* take place at this time, so we should deal with it briefly.

Galatians 2:11–21 tells us that the Judaizers of Jerusalem, despite their enormous setback, still tried to advance their cause, and a party of them returned to Antioch. Peter happened to be paying a visit to the church at Antioch about the same time, and at first he had had no scruples about dining with the Gentile converts there. When the Judaizers showed up, however, he stopped his table fellowship with the Gentiles to forestall any criticism from these militant traditionalists. Peter's inconsistency, however, grew contagious, and soon even Barnabas and other Jewish Christians were also dining on a strictly kosher basis, leaving Gentile believers by themselves—and justifiably offended. Possibly Peter felt that his mission, now mainly to the circumcised, dictated such conduct, but it remains a sad misstep in an otherwise noble career, a throwback to the Simon Peter of pre-Pentecost days. Barnabas's conduct, following as it did the first mission journey, was even less defensible.

Paul quickly set Peter straight. "I opposed him to his face," Paul later wrote the Galatians (2:11). He told Peter, (Galatians 2:14) "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" The freedom

of the Gospel was at stake, and Paul would not let Peter risk it or return to legalism.

Verses 36–37—Fast on the heels of this spat came the Barnabas-versus-Paul quarrel on whether or not John Mark should come along on the second mission journey they were now planning. Barnabas agreed that it was time to revisit the new churches in Asia Minor, but he wanted his cousin to accompany them. Verse 38—Paul, however, "did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work." Was Paul being pigheaded? obstinate? Perhaps he was just being realistic: The kind of expeditions they were planning would demand total commitment and reliability.

Verse 39—Barnabas refused to back down, and it actually led to a split between the two apostles: "They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company." The quarrel had doubtless been made worse by Barnabas's weakness in the face of the Judaizers at Antioch. In any case, Barnabas now took John Mark with him on a separate mission journey to Cyprus, while Paul chose a new partner, Silas, who had helped deliver the letter of decision from the Jerusalem council to the church in Antioch. And so God worked good from bad: The net result of this dispute was two missionary expeditions instead of one. In the future, Paul would continue to recognize Barnabas as a working apostle like himself (1 Corinthians 9:6), and, happily, he would even become reconciled with Mark in Rome (Colossians 4:10).

Nevertheless, these two famous apostolic squabbles—Paul versus Peter, and Paul versus Barnabas—are certainly extraordinary, and they used to bother some of the church fathers. Jerome, a fourth-century church scholar, for example, tried to explain away Peter's conduct in Antioch and Paul's response as play-acting to teach a lesson, but Augustine, another church scholar who lived at the same time, totally disagreed with Jerome—almost causing *another* round of church controversy on this matter!

Augustine was right: The quarrel *did* happen in fact, and it need not be explained away. There is something very refreshing about the realism and honesty in the reports of the two quarrels in Antioch. Saints are obviously sinners too, capable of failure and mistakes, and their story is ever so much more believable when it is told in full.

Most other biographies in the Greco-Roman world of that period are laced with flattery of their subjects, and so lose much credibility. The Bible, on the other hand, is the one religious book in ancient literature that admits its heroes are sinners too and then provides an up-front catalogue of the sins. So instead of glossing over such unhappy episodes, Acts and the Letters of Paul report them with honesty and detail.

Another reason for including such scenes in the record may have been to comfort future generations of Christians. If, in the warm afterglow of the first Pentecost, the early church, informed and inflamed as it was by the Holy Spirit, could *still* become a cockpit of controversy between faithful and erring, parties and ethnic groups, then there is some small consolation for later generations of Christians, which have done—and are doing—the same thing.

However, there is also a lesson from the first Christians on how to *solve* such controversies. The decision at the Jerusalem council involved several elements: (1) *A Face-to-Face Confrontation*. There was no whispering campaign, no rush to publish, no indirect attacks or misunderstandings, but an open exchange between reasonable people, not extremists. (2) *Listening*. Possibly the most important verse in Luke's report on the conclave is 15:12: "The whole assembly became silent as they listened ..." An honest effort was made by each side to hear the other side. (3) *A Scriptural Solution*. James based his decision on three prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos—whom he deemed mouthpieces of God.

Those who are involved in church controversies today—especially in the local congregation—might well look back to Christian origins for Christian solutions!

## Conclusion

The Apostolic Council of Jerusalem had not hatched a fresh or novel idea in approving Gentile conversions directly into Christianity. It was not pressured by the obvious successes of Paul and Barnabas in this regard. Rather, it was Jesus Himself who had issued orders to His disciples to reach and teach all nations (Matthew 28:19). Paul and Barnabas had followed those orders exuberantly, but others failed to have that sort of apostolic vision. And so the Jerusalem council became necessary.

It was a crucial breather between the first and second mission journeys, when the all-important question of how to become a Christian was finally given a definite answer. That reply, under the guidance of God, drew a wider circle to take others in rather than a narrower circle to shut others out. And that was the decision that would lead to what became the most successful single happening in the history of this planet: the holy Christian church.

Now Paul and his associates could venture out again, knowing that the Gospel they had proclaimed and would continue to proclaim was apostolic and absolutely genuine.

## Concluding Activities

Speak a brief prayer asking the Lord to guide the church through its controversies in our own day, with the result that the Gospel will continue to remain free to do its saving work. Then make any necessary announcements. Ask whether participants are enjoying the enrichment magazines. Distribute study leaflet 3.