



Session Twenty-Two

The Book of Acts, Pt.6

Acts 13:1-15:35

The focus of this week's readings is two-fold: Paul's first missionary journey and the so-called Council of Jerusalem where a decision was reached that was absolutely critical to the spread of the Gospel and growth of the church. From this point forward, the missionary activities of Paul become the nearly exclusive focus of Acts; however, James, the brother of Jesus, plays a pivotal role in the Jerusalem Council.

At no point in Acts does Luke say anything as obvious as "here is what Jesus intended his church to be" followed by a detailed description of how a church should be organized, administered, and focused. But particularly with the onset of Paul's missionary journeys, if we draw careful conclusions from what Luke *does* say, the Lord's intentions for his church can be discerned. This will be reflected in many of the questions I urge you to consider throughout the remainder of the study.

1) Paul (with Barnabas) begins his first missionary journey from Antioch which, by that point, had replaced Jerusalem as the center of the early church's mission. Note, also, that the Holy Spirit is a key player here (13:2, 13:4) in deciding where Paul is to go. And note, too, that it is here Saul is first called "Paul" (13:9). Pay particular attention as you read not only these chapters but the remainder of Acts that Paul's work in spreading the Gospel follows the same pattern as Peter's and Philip's, which is to say that Paul takes his message to the people, many of whom respond favorably while others, usually those in positions of power, do their best to dissuade the people and persecute Paul. All of which is to say that the church, if it's true to its roots, is an *agent of change* and change is always threatening. If the church today was similarly an agent of change, how would our expectations of the church (and our personal experience of church) need to be different from what they are?

2) In Pisidian Antioch, Paul makes a lengthy speech—call it a sermon, if you will—that, like those made by Peter and Stephen, lays-out the pre-history and provides an overview of Jesus' earthly ministry, followed by a plea for repentance and promise of forgiveness (13:16-41). But

Luke then says something very, very curious: "...and all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (13:48). Such a comment seems to suggest the reality of *predestination*. Whether or not you're comfortable with this particularly Reformed theological notion, there's no doubt that the Holy Spirit, divine initiative, and personal choice all play a significant role in a person's decision to *believe*. What do you think each of these roles is? Is one more important than the others?

3) Note that for all the people who turned to faith in Christ, Paul and Barnabas were nonetheless persecuted and expelled (13:49-50). As one commentator puts it, Luke's narrative in Acts "elevates suffering as the consequence of mission—the collision of obedient proclamation and unrepentant hearts." If that is not our experience of mission, are we going about mission the wrong way?

4) In Lystra, Paul heals a man crippled since birth (14:8-10). Notice that the man doesn't have faith in God because he is healed but has faith prior to his healing. Look again at your answer to question 2. How does this situation square—or not—with your answer?

5) Many people struggle with Paul and what he writes in his letters, finding him authoritarian, judgmental, and lacking in grace. In 14:19 we read that Paul is stoned for his witness in Derbe, to the point that those stoning him believed him dead. This isn't the first time Paul was stoned and it won't be the last. Jesus promised him he'd suffer for the Gospel and he does. Does Paul's willingness to suffer yet continue witnessing to Christ cast his writings in any different light for you? You might also reflect on 14:22.

6) 15:1-35 recounts the so-called Council at Jerusalem which convened to consider the issue stated in 15:5. Essentially, the question was this: do you have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian? As noted above, this was a critical question for the early church. From the beginning, Christianity had been a sect within Judaism. Depending on how this question was answered, Christianity could've remained that way. But as the experience of Peter (15:7-11) and Paul and Barnabas (15:12)—not to mention Jesus himself—made clear, the Gospel and its promises were intended for *all* people. James' acknowledgment of that on behalf of all the apostles and elders liberated the early church to grow according to the leading of the Spirit.

But there's more at stake here than church growth. By not requiring people to first become Jews and live according to *Torah*—the Mosaic law—the early church made a decisive stand about *identity*. A person's identity as a follower of Jesus would not be a function of how closely he/she adhered to the Law; it would be a function of new life in the Spirit. In other words, it would be a function of a person's willingness to be *transformed* and live the Word.

Frankly, preaching and teaching adherence to law is much easier than transformation, which may explain why so many Christians understand discipleship in terms of sin and doctrine rather than in terms of having their minds and behaviors transformed.

What should a church do and be if it wants to focus on transformation?