

10. Acts 15-16



Acts 15:1

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'

This conflicts with what the community in Jerusalem came to see in the light of the experience of Peter with Cornelius (see 11:18), and also with the teaching of Paul in the churches of southern Galatia concerning the place of faith in the receiving of salvation (14:8,22,23,27). Furthermore, it conflicts with the policy of James, Peter and John which they agreed to with Paul on what seems to have been an earlier visit (see Acts 14:28; Galatians 2:3).

God is love and, as Peter came to realise, 'in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10:35). Paul states that God 'desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4).

The Problem

The church in Antioch (Syria) began within the synagogues (see Acts 11:19). However, Antioch was a Gentile city and ‘a great number of Greeks became believers and turned to the Lord’ (Acts 11:21). The church in Jerusalem felt the need to check on what was happening, so they sent Barnabas down to assess the situation. He was favourably impressed (see Acts 11:22-23). What happened in Jerusalem, and even in Antioch, was one thing. What Paul and Barnabas had done during their missionary journey was another. They had begun their proclamation concerning Jesus in the synagogues, and Gentiles who attended the synagogues (‘you others who fear God’, Acts 13:16) were among those who became disciples. But then they took a further huge step by going to the Gentiles *as Gentiles*, and welcoming them as disciples (see Acts 13:46-49).

Even if the communities were still organised along traditional Jewish lines (Acts 14:23), Jewish Christians back in Antioch, and especially in Jerusalem, who heard reports of what had happened would have wondered where this missionary strategy would lead. What would happen when Gentiles were in the majority? – a likely outcome outside Palestine. It was one thing for a Jewish-Christian community to be an instrument of God in carrying out the promise given to Abraham. But could people become disciples of Jesus with no real connection to Jewish culture or tradition, or to the law given through Moses?

Paul is not against circumcision (see Acts 16:3; also 1 Corinthians 7:18). He is against circumcising Gentiles or thinking that circumcision brings salvation. Paul's views on the matter can be found in his Letter to the Galatians (see 2:12; 5:2-6; 6:12-15), which may well have been composed at this time.

Acts 15:1

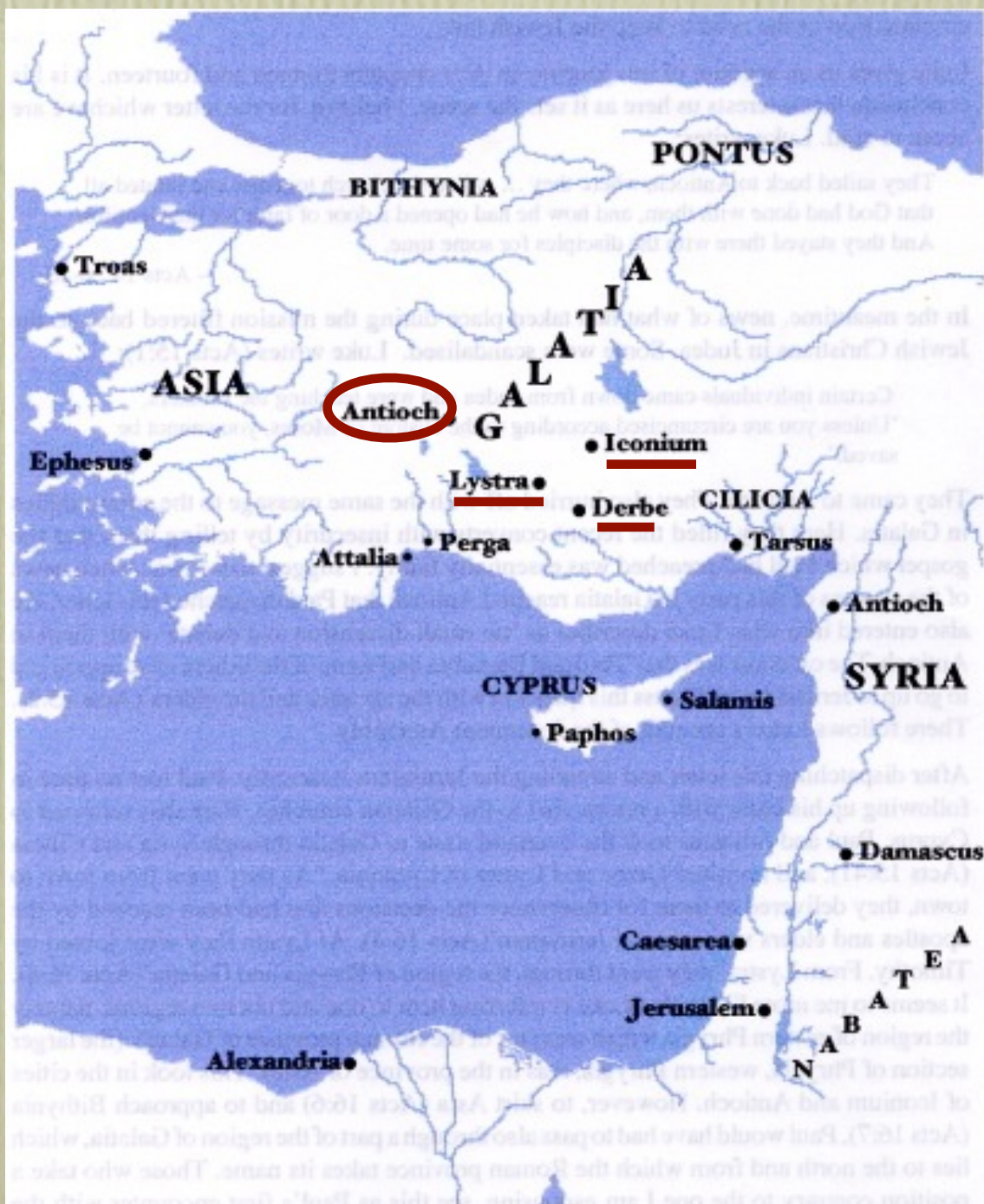
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Letter to the Galatians

Paul's Letter composed in Antioch (Syria) to the churches where he had proclaimed the Gospel on his first missionary journey.

48AD

The earliest writing preserved in the Christian New Testament.



Acts 15:2-6 : The Jerusalem Assembly 49AD

And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders (see Acts 11:30). They were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.' The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.

Acts 15:7-12

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said: ‘My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.

Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, **we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.**’ (see Acts 13:39)

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the **signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.**

Acts 15:13-18

After they finished speaking, James (the leading presbyter, see Acts 12:17; Galatians 2:12) replied, ‘My brothers, listen to me. Simeon (Aramaic form of Simon) has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written [Amos 9:11-12 LXX], ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord — even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.’

We might note also the Greek version of Zechariah 2:10-11: ‘I will come and construct a tent in your midst, says the Lord, and in that day many nations will flee to the Lord and they will be to him as a people, and they will tent among you.’

Acts 15:19-21

James now turns his attention to the practical matter of how Jews and Gentiles are to live in harmonious communion as brothers and sisters sharing table fellowship.

I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only

1) from things polluted by idols [Leviticus 17:8-9]

2) from πορνεία [prohibited sexual relations] [Leviticus 18:6-23] and

3) from whatever has been strangled and from blood. [Leviticus 17:10,13]

For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the **synagogues.** (and the above laws explicitly apply to ‘strangers living in the land’ (Leviticus).

Acts 15:22-27

Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and **Silas**, leaders among the brothers, with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in **Antioch and Syria and Cilicia**, greetings. Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though **with no instructions from us**, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, we have decided **unanimously** (ὁμοθυμαδὸν - sharing the mind and heart of Jesus) to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.

Acts 15:28-29

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication (πορνεία). If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.'

That these matters continued to pose problems for the early mixed communities is clear from a reading of Paul's letters (see 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:12-20; 8:1-13; 10:18, 30).

Acts 15:30-35

So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When its members read it, they rejoiced at the encouragement (παράκλησις). Judas and Silas (see 15:22), who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage (παρεκάλειω) and strengthen the believers. After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the believers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

Paul's personal agreement with the spirit and the conclusions of the Jerusalem assembly can be seen from his statement to the Ephesians concerning the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the one Christian communion. Addressing himself to Gentile Christians, he writes as follows.

Ephesians 2:13-18

‘Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.’

Acts 15:36-41

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Come, let us return and visit (ἐπισκεπτομαι, see Acts 1:20 ‘overseer’) the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work (see 13:13). The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Acts 15:41 - 16:1

Paul went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra [14:20-21] and to Lystra [14:8-20],.



Acts 16:1-5

Paul went on also to **Derbe** [14:20-21] and to **Lystra** [14:8-20], where there was a disciple named **Timothy**, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer [Eunice, 2Timothy 1:5]; but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him (see 1 Corinthians 4:17); and he took him and had him circumcised (1 Corinthians 9:19-22) because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the **apostles** [mentioned for the last time] and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

Acts 16:6-8

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

Antioch to Troas 1500ks, 6-8 months



Acts 16:9

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'



Acts 16:10-12

When he had seen the vision, **we** immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called **us** to proclaim the good news to them. **We** set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to **Philippi**, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.





Philippi had been reconstructed by Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great, in 356BC. It held a strategically important position, guarding a mountain pass on the overland trade route between Europe and Asia. In 168BC it was incorporated into the Roman Empire. In 42BC it was the scene of the victory of Antony and Octavian (who was to become the emperor Augustus) over Brutus and Cassius, and was established as a Roman colony, where members of the victorious army could retire with all the rights of Roman citizens. It was in the chief of the four districts into which Macedonia was divided and was a Roman city with Latin as the official language. There were some Jews there, but not enough, it seems, for a synagogue. Though Amphipolis was the capital of the district in Macedonia to which Philippi belonged, Philippi could still be called ‘a leading city of the district’.

Acts 16:13-15

On the sabbath day **we** went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

Acts 16:16-21

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, **we** met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” (compare Luke 4:41) She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.”

6Acts 16:22-26

The crowd joined in attacking **them**, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging (2 Corinthians 11:25), they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Paul speaks of his stay in Philippi, and of his having been ‘shamefully mistreated’ there (1 Thessalonians 2:2).

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. (compare Acts 5:19; 12:10)

Acts 16:27-34

When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (compare Luke 3:10; Acts 2:37.) They answered, “**Believe on** (ἐπὶ ‘relying in faith on’) **the Lord Jesus** (compare Acts 11:17), and you will be saved, you and your household.” They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptised without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Acts 16:35-40

When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, “Let those men go.” And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, “The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace.” But Paul replied, “They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.” The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologised to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. After leaving the prison they went to Lydia’s home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, **they** departed.