

ACTS 13-15

Paul undertakes the first of 3 major missionary journeys. He is accompanied by Barnabas, although later they part company (15:36-40). This initiative and its success sets up the confrontation in Jerusalem between the conservative Jewish element in the church and the more liberal, gentile-supporting element.

1) Saul (Paul) is considered a prophet or teacher before he becomes an apostle (one sent out). He is a 13th apostle besides the other 12. The reason for his claim to the apostleship on an equal footing is his unique role as apostle to the gentiles (something that comes out more distinctly in his letters)

2) The Holy Spirit is always the force that sends, confirms, assures, strengthens, heals, convicts, converts, and discerns the sincerity of the heart. The apostles are simply instruments (the hands, feet, voice and heart of the risen Christ as powered by the Spirit).

3) Paul's sermon (13:13-41) contains many interesting elements. Some of these include

- God's great faithfulness and Israel's ingratitude and infidelity to God.
- The residents and leaders of Jerusalem are accused of having Jesus crucified because they did not understand or recognize the words of the prophets pointing to the messiah which Jesus was.
- Jesus was raised and he appeared to 'those Galileans' who had come up to Jerusalem with him.
- Through Jesus, forgiveness of sins is proclaimed and by believing (accepting/receiving) him, one is set free from their sins (sins from which the law of Moses could not set free).

4) The missionary practice of Paul (and his associates) was to go to the local synagogues of whatever city or town they went. The Christian mission would begin among Jews and those Gentiles having adopted the Jewish faith. What they experienced was that even though some Jews responded to the gospel of Jesus as Messiah, the number of Gentiles who responded was even greater. In 13:47, Paul interprets this to be a result of Jewish rejection of the gospel. This rejection is also a sign for Paul that God is now turning toward the Gentiles, and the conviction (repentance) of heart for the gospel given to the Gentiles is also a sign of the Holy Spirit's action in Gentile hearts.

5) Chapter 15 is a wonderful study of the first major conflict within the early church. Some of the players included conservative Jewish believers with a background in Pharisaism, based in Jerusalem. They were particularly angry with the approach of Hellenistic Jews and especially of Paul.

Paul's approach was to welcome Gentiles into the fold without compelling them to follow the Jewish religious law in all its ceremonial (Sabbath -Saturday observance in addition to Sunday) and ritual demands (circumcision, preparing food kosher, cleansing rituals, set prayers, etc.) as much as its ethical focus (10 commandments, loving God and neighbour).

6) Even though Peter as well as others had already opened the door to the Gentile mission, what was yet to be determined was what would be required in terms of lifestyle and behaviour among the Gentile converts. After discussion, debate and prayer they settle with a compromise set of requirements for Gentile believers - all of them intended to distinguish Christians from the pagan world around them. These requirements are: anything strangled or not drained of its blood would be considered unclean and not to be eaten (its life still in it), anything sacrificed to an idol in the market-place before it is bought and cooked, and sexual immorality (based on Levitical laws). Moreover, they are encouraged to continue going to synagogues where the scriptures are being read (The Old Testament), and hence, where the ethical laws of God are being taught (like the 10 commandments).

7) Paul and Barnabas separate over a dispute about John Mark (believed to be the author of the gospel of Mark). Paul claims he is unreliable whereas Barnabas wants to give him another chance (being that he is also Barnabas' nephew). Just because the Holy Spirit is powering this movement, it doesn't mean everyone can work together well or is on the same page. Conflict and disagreement are part of every movement and community which is alive and active. The key is how God's love, embodied in Christ, calling for continuing repentance and generosity in opening hearts to forgiveness and reconciliation, rises up in and through the actions (feet and hands), words (voice) and quality of compassion (heart) of the leaders and communities that claim the name Christian (Christ followers).