

Bible Study
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Acts 13-15
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13:1 The Antioch church was the first Christian congregation to witness to the Gentiles in its own city (11:19f.). It then became the first to send missionaries forth into the larger world. Judging from Acts, Antioch was the first church to catch the vision of “foreign missions.” The leadership is described in unique terms as comprised of “prophets and teachers” (v. 1), and five names are listed. Although it is possible grammatically to construe the first three as being prophets and the last two as teachers, it probably is best to see all five as comprising the congregational leadership as prophet-teachers. Paul and Barnabas already had been described as “teaching” the congregation (11:26), and the additional designation of “prophet” would emphasize the inspired, Spirit-led dimension to their teaching.

In Paul’s epistles the role of “prophet” is regularly depicted as a gift of the Spirit (cf. Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:10, 28; 14:1–5, 24–25, 31; Eph 4:11). The gift of prophecy can be that of foretelling future events, as with Agabus (Acts 11:27). More often it is that of speaking an inspired word from God for the edification and direction of the community.¹¹ In this latter sense the gift is exemplified in the present passage, as these “prophetic teachers” were inspired by the Spirit to set Paul and Barnabas apart for a special mission (v. 2).

One is intrigued by the list of five names. Those of Barnabas and Paul are quite familiar, and they become even more so in the following narrative. Of the other three, nothing else is known for certain. “Simeon called Niger” perhaps indicates that he was a black, since *niger* is the Latin word for black. Some have suggested that he might have come from Cyrene, like Lucius, or from elsewhere in North Africa. From the time of the early church fathers, some have equated “Lucius of Cyrene” with Luke and seen this solitary reference as Luke’s “signature” to his book. Little evidence, however, substantiates this;

¹¹ See F. V. Filson, “The Christian Teacher in the First Century,” *JBL* 60 (1941): 317–28; H. Greeven, “Propheten, Lehrer, Vorsteher bei Paulus,” *ZNW* 44 (1952–53): 1–43; O. Knoch, “‘In der Gemeinde von Antiochia gab es Propheten und Lehrer’ (Apg. 13, 1),” *Liturgisches Jahrbuch* 32 (1982): 133–50.

and the Greek “Luke” and Latin “Lucius” are different names.²² Manaen is described as having been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch. The Herod referred to would be Antipas (cf. Luke 3:1; Acts 4:27). The term used to describe Manaen’s relationship to Herod is *syntrophos*, which literally referred to someone suckled by the same nurse as a baby. Later it came to mean someone “reared together” with someone. Manaen was thus of considerable social standing, a courtier and childhood companion of the king.³³ Manaen was possibly the source of Luke’s rather extensive treatment of Antipas (cf. Luke 8:3; 13:31f.; 23:7–12).

13:2 In v. 2 “they” likely refers to the entire Antioch congregation gathered for worship,⁴⁴ but the directive of the Holy Spirit may well have been mediated through the inspiration of the prophet-teachers. That they were fasting indicates the church was in a mood of particular expectancy and openness to the Lord’s leading. Although evidence suggests the Jewish practice of fasting was regularly observed in some early Christian circles, the association of fasting with worship suggests a time of intense devotion when normal human activities like eating were suspended. This is still a valid form of fasting for Christians today.⁵⁵ The Spirit directed the community “to set apart” Barnabas and Saul. The Spirit led the church in its mission. As throughout Acts, God took the initiative in every new development of the Christian witness; however, the church did its part. It fasted and prayed, seeking the divine leading in a mode of expectant devotion. The Spirit was not specific at this point, referring only to “the work to which I have called them.” The little word “work” (*ergon*) refers to Paul and Barnabas’s mission. It forms an

²² Some have gone further and connected Luke/Lucius with the Lucius of Rom 16:21. For the view that Lucius was a Cypriot and that “Cyrene” is a scribal error for an original text that read Kyrenia (a town in Cyprus), see F. F. Bishop, “Simon and Lucius: Where did they come from? A Plea for Cyprus,” *ExpTim* 51 (1939–40): 148–53.

³³ Josephus (*Ant.* 15.373–78) tells of an Essene of similar name who rose to favor in the court of Herod the Great for predicting Herod’s rise to kingship. Some would see this as possibly the grandfather of the Manaen of Acts 13:1, but this is strictly speculative. Unlikely is the view that Luke confused Barnabas’s nickname with that of Manaen since the Hebrew form of Manaen (Menachem) means *comforter* (cf. 4:36).

⁴⁴ The word for “worship” is λειτουργέω, which in secular Greek referred to a public service rendered without pay. In the NT it is employed widely for any ministry rendered in the name of the Lord. In the OT it was used of the service of the priests and Levites in the temple worship, a similar context to that of Acts 13:2.

⁵⁵ For the linking of fasting with prayer and worship, cf. Luke 2:37; Acts 14:23.

“inclusion” for the whole mission, occurring here at its inception and again at its conclusion (14:26).

13:3 The congregation responded in faith. It is not clear who laid hands on Paul and Barnabas, whether the other prophet-teachers, the elders of the church (who can only be assumed from the structure of the other churches in Acts), or the whole congregation. The gesture almost certainly was *not* an ordination. No one in Antioch had any rank exceeding that of Paul and Barnabas. The gesture was more a symbol of the congregation’s endorsing the work of the two. They separated them for a task in which they would perform a witness on behalf of the whole church.⁶⁶ In modern terms it was a commissioning service for the two missionaries.

2. Sergius Paulus Converted on Cyprus (13:4–12)

13:4 Paul and Barnabas set out on their mission, departing from Seleucia, the main port for Antioch, lying about sixteen miles downstream and five miles from where the Orontes flowed into the Mediterranean. Their destination was Cyprus, some sixty miles distant. Barnabas was himself a Cypriot by birth (4:36), the Hellenists had already begun some witness on the island (11:19), and other natives of Cyprus belonged to the Antioch church (11:20).

The island had been settled from ancient times; it was occupied as early as the eighteenth century b.c. and was colonized successively by Egyptians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Assyrians, Persians, and the Egyptian Ptolemies. Since the mid-first century b.c. it had been under Roman jurisdiction and from 22 b.c. had been organized as a senatorial province administered by a proconsul. It is a testimony to Luke’s accuracy in details that he designated Sergius Paulus (v. 7) the Roman proconsul (*an-thypatos*), the correct term for the administrator of a senatorial province.⁷⁷

⁶⁶ E. Best, “Acts xiii:1–3,” *JTS* 11 (1960): 344–48. For the unlikely view that it was an ordination to the apostolate, see R. B. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition* (London: Methuen, 1901), 191–93; S. Dockx, “L’ordination de Barnabé et de Saul d’après Actes 13, 1–3,” *NRT* 98 (1976): 238–50.

⁷⁷ There were two types of Roman provinces. Imperial provinces were under the emperor, had legions stationed in them, and were administered by legates (governors). Senatorial provinces were under the Roman senate, had no legions, and were administered by proconsuls. Antioch was in the *imperial* province of Syria. For further information on Cyprus, see M. F. Unger, “Archaeology and Paul’s Tour of Cyprus,” *BibSac* 117 (1960): 229–33.

13:5 Barnabas and Paul landed at Salamis, the closest Cypriot port to Seleucia. Here they began a pattern that Paul would perpetuate throughout his missionary career. Where there were local synagogues, he began his ministry by preaching first in them. There was an extensive Jewish community at Salamis, and evidently several synagogues were there.⁸⁸ Only at this point do we learn that John Mark was part of the entourage. He is described as their “helper” (*hypēretēs*). This term is used in Luke 1:2 for “servants of the word” and in Luke 4:20 for the worship leader in the synagogue. Some have seen Mark’s role as that of catechist, or keeper of written documents on Jesus’ life, or even the administrator of baptism.⁹⁹ Keeping the more general meaning of the term, which is that of a servant or helper, probably would be wisest. Mark assisted Barnabas and Paul in whatever way they needed him.

13:6–7 From Salamis the three traversed the width of the island, arriving at Paphos some ninety miles to the west. It may well be that they evangelized the villages along the way,¹⁰⁰ but Luke did not dwell on this. He rather focused on the high point of the Cyprus experience—the conversion of the proconsul and the defeat of a false prophet’s attempt to thwart their witness to him. Paphos was a fairly new city and the seat of Roman government on the island.¹¹¹ The proconsul at this time was named Sergius Paulus. Although there is no certain archaeological verification of his proconsulship on Cyprus at this time, several inscriptions might point in that direction.¹²² Further, the

⁸⁸ For Jews on Cyprus see Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 282 and Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.284–87.

⁹⁹ For catechist see R. O. P. Taylor, “The Ministry of Mark,” *ExpTim* 54 (1942–43): 136–38. For keeper of written documents, see B. T. Holmes, “Luke’s Description of John Mark,” *JBL* 54 (1935): 63–72.

¹⁰⁰ The verb used for traversing in v. 6 is often used in Acts with the connotation of witnessing along the way.

¹¹¹ The old settlement of Paphos was originally established by the Phoenicians and lay some seven miles to the southeast of the new city of that name. This original settlement had been destroyed by earthquake in 15 B.C. The new city had thus been built during the Roman period in Roman style.

¹²² There are problems with all the inscriptions that are relevant, either about date or the incompleteness of the inscription due to damage. Two inscriptions have been found in Pisidian Antioch, one to an L. Sergius Paullus and another to a female Sergia Paulla. At Soli on the northern coast of Cyprus was found an inscription to a Paulus, but his office was not specified; and he seems to date too late for the Paulus of Acts. A Lucius

family of the Pauli was an influential Roman patrician family, producing many officials throughout the empire over a long period, which in itself lends credence to a Paulus as proconsul of Cyprus.

13:8 Paul's efforts to witness to the proconsul did not go unopposed, however. In the official's entourage was a certain Jewish "false prophet" named "Bar-Jesus." Luke described him as a "magos," a term that could be used favorably, as it is of the Persian astrologer-magi of Matt 2. It was often used in the sense of a charlatan, a trickster, a claimant to false powers; and it is in this derogatory sense that Luke referred to Bar-Jesus. One should not be altogether surprised that a Roman official could be hoodwinked by such a figure. Romans put great stock in powers of divination and even had their own sacred oracles. **Charlatans like Bar-Jesus were usually smooth and highly knowledgeable, practicing a sort of pseudoscience.** His Jewish credentials did not hurt him either. The Jews had a reputation among the Romans for their antiquity and depth of religious knowledge. Josephus mentioned a number of such Jewish sorcerers who had great successes among the Gentiles.¹¹³³ Bar-Jesus probably offered his services to Paulus in terms of divining future events for him. In any event, just as with Simon-Magus (8:9–13, 18f.), the setup was a lucrative one; and Bar-Jesus saw the Christian missionaries as a potential threat. In v. 8 Luke added that the magician also had the name of Elymas and that "is what his name means." The etymology is anything but clear, but the connection seems to be between "magician" and Elymas, not with "Bar-Jesus."

13:8–10 Any number of suggestions have been made to show the possible etymological relationship between the two terms. Of these the most likely are that Elymas comes from the Arabic root *alim*, which means *sage*, or that it comes from the Aramaic *haloma*, which means *interpreter of dreams*.¹¹⁴⁴ Either of these derivations would point to the

Sergius Paullus is given on a Roman list as a curator of the Tiber, but there is no evidence to link him with service on Cyprus. On the whole question see F. F. Bruce, "Chronological Questions in Acts," *BJRL* 68 (1986): 279–80.

¹³¹³ His most intriguing reference is in *Antiquities* 20.236–37, where he spoke of a Cyprian Jewish sorcerer who aided Felix in seducing Drusilla away from her husband Azizus, the king of Emesa. Some interpreters would see this as none other than Elymas/Bar-Jesus. (Josephus's event was some five to ten years later than Paul's encounter with Elymas.) Such an identification is at best speculative.

¹⁴¹⁴ A number of interpreters point to the variant found in several Western witnesses, where ἔτοιμος occurs in place of Elymas. He would thus claim to be "son of readiness." For the derivation from Aramaic *haloma*, see L. Yaure, "Elymas, Nehelamite, Pethor,"

same fact—Elymas claimed to predict the future. For Luke such claims were unfounded. Elymas was a “false prophet” (v. 6). Threatened, Elymas sought to thwart the Christian missionaries by turning “the proconsul from the faith” (v. 8). At this point Sergius Paulus was not a believer. Elymas sought to hinder the missionaries from their witness to the faith, to divert Paulus’s attention from the proclamation. This was a serious mistake, poor judgment on his part. Like Peter with Simon Magus (8:20–23), Paul turned on Elymas with a vengeance. Luke clarified that it was ultimately not Paul but the Spirit of God whom Elymas had taken on. Paul was “filled with the Holy Spirit.” Looking at him with a withering gaze, Paul began to denounce Elymas, “You are a child of the devil.” No one familiar with Aramaic (as Elymas probably would have been) could have missed the pun. His name, Bar-Jesus (in Aramaic Bar-Jeshua), meant etymologically *son of the Savior*. He was no son of the Savior; quite the opposite, he was son of the devil.

Paul’s language is filled with Old Testament phrases. “Enemy of everything that is right” surely could refer to his general moral opposition to all that was good and just. The phrase is literally, however, “enemy of all righteousness”; and “righteousness” is a primary attribute of God throughout the Bible. Paul could have implied that Elymas had set himself up as an enemy of God. He was filled with “deceit” (*dolos*) and “trickery” (*rhadiourgia*). *Dolos* originally meant *bait* by which something or someone was lured into a trap. This was what Elymas had been doing all along with Sergius Paulus, deceiving him with all his false claims. Now he was adding to his evil ways—not only tricking the proconsul but perverting the straight paths of the Lord himself in attempting to divert the official from the gospel.

13:11 One might have been able to take advantage of a proconsul, but one could not withstand the ways of the Lord with impunity. Sometimes in Acts the inevitable punishment came swiftly, as it did for Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11). It descended with equal immediacy on Elymas. Paul predicted it: “You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun” (v. 11). Paul himself had experienced blindness, not, however, as punishment but as a sign of the Lord’s presence in his conversion.¹⁵¹⁵ One would like to agree with Chrysostom, who argued that Paul inflicted

JBL 79 (1960): 297–314; C. Daniel, “Un Essenien mentionné dans les Actes des Apôtres: Barjesu,” *Museon* 84 (1971): 455–76. F. C. Burkitt follows the Western reading ἔτοιμος and emends it to ὁ λοιμός—“pestilent fellow” (“The Interpretation of Bar-Jesus,” *JTS* 4 [1903]: 127–29).

¹⁵¹⁵ In the OT the phrase “not see the light” referred to *death* (cf. Job 3:16; Num 12:12), but later it came to mean *blindness* (E. Richard, “The Old Testament in Acts,” *CBQ* 42 [1980]: 330–41).

his own blindness on Elymas in the hope that it would lead to his conversion, just as it had been a sign of his own. More likely, however, the blindness was symbolic of Elymas's own spiritual state of being (cf. John 3:19–20; 9:39).

Paul's prediction was immediately fulfilled. "Mist and darkness" overcame Elymas, and he began to grope around and seek for someone to lead him about. There was some clemency in his judgment. The blindness would be limited, "for a time." Luke did not say how long. The significant witness was given by the miracle—to Elymas of the judgment that had come from opposing God, to Sergius Paulus of the power of the God Paul proclaimed. For the Christian reader a further important point has been made: Christianity has nothing to do with the magic and superstition of this world; its power, the power of the Word and Spirit, overcomes them all. This theme will return in Acts 19.

13:12 Verse 12 describes the effect of the miracle on the proconsul: he believed. He was not only impressed by the miracle but also by the teaching about the Lord. This familiar pattern already has been illustrated in Acts. The miracles wrought by the Spirit often provide an opening for faith. It is much as with the lame beggar of chap. 3. The crowds were attracted to the apostles by the healing (3:11). They believed in the Lord as the result of Peter's preaching the gospel (4:4). **So here Paulus was impressed by what had happened to Elymas. He believed as a result of the teaching about the Lord.** There is no reason to doubt the reality of his conversion.¹¹⁶⁶ This has been the main point of the whole Cyprus narrative. No other conversions have been mentioned, though there were surely others as a result of the missionaries' preaching. **Luke left us with one major result of the mission—the conversion of a prominent Roman official.**

Before leaving the Cyprus narrative, one small but significant note must be treated. In v. 9 Luke identified Saul by his Roman name, **"who was also called Paul."** **From this point on in Acts, the name Paul appears, whereas before it had been "Saul."** The only exceptions hereafter are Paul's recounting his conversion experience when he repeated the call of Jesus to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Why did Luke change the designation at this point? Some have argued that he did so because of the presence of Sergius Paulus in the narrative, a man of the same name. That may well have something to do with it but only in an indirect way. Paul was now entering Greco-Roman territory as he worked on Cyprus, no longer working primarily among Palestinian Jews. He almost certainly had both names. Paul was his Roman cognomen, and every

¹¹⁶⁶ See J. Foster, "Was Sergius Paulus Converted? (Acts xiii.12)," *ExpTim* 60 (1948): 354–55.

Roman citizen had such a name.¹¹⁷⁷ It would be the name natural to every Greek and Roman who crossed his path—like Sergius Paulus. Paul also had a Hebrew name, called a signum, an additional name used within his own community. It was Saul, the same name as the ancient Jewish king who was also a Benjamite. This signum “Saul” was surely that used of him in Jewish circles. Luke’s switch at this point is thus natural and quite observant of the situation. Moving into Greco-Roman territory, Paul would be the name primarily used to address him. There is a further subtle dimension. **With the change in name, there also came a shift in status. Heretofore, Barnabas had always been mentioned before Paul. It was “Barnabas and Saul” (cf. 13:1, 7; 11:30; 12:25). From here on it was “Paul and Barnabas” (cf. 13:42, 46).¹¹⁸⁸ Even more significantly, it was “Paul and his companions” (13:13). Paul was more and more on his own ground as he moved into Greco-Roman territory. He assumed leadership.**

3. Paul’s Address to the Synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (13:13–52)

The remainder of chap. 13 is set primarily in Pisidian Antioch. It consists of three main parts: (1) **the journey to Antioch and the setting of the stage for Paul’s speech in the synagogue (vv. 13–16a), (2) Paul’s address to the synagogue (vv. 16b–41), and (3) the final response of the Jews and Gentiles on the occasion of a second visit to the synagogue in Antioch (vv. 42–52).**

(1) The Setting (13:13–16a)

¹³From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. ¹⁴From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.”

¹⁶Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said:

¹⁷¹⁷ Romans had three names: a praenomen, a nomen, and a cognomen, as in Gaius Julius Caesar. “Paul” seems to have been a cognomen. We simply do not know his first two Roman names. The practice of having an “ethnic” signum was common in the East. See G. A. Harrer, “Saul who also is called Paul,” *HTR* 33 (1940): 19–33.

¹⁸¹⁸ The only exceptions are 14:12, 14 and 15:12, 25, where Barnabas actually did have priority in the view of the Lystrans (Zeus) and the church in Jerusalem (their former delegate to Antioch).

Leaving Cyprus, Paul and his party sailed from Paphos northwest to the coast of present-day Turkey. Their stopping place was Perga, some twelve miles inland. Perga was located in Pamphylia, the land that lay between the Taurus mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. The area of Lycia lay to the west and Cilicia to the east. Pamphylia was under Roman jurisdiction, having been a separate province from 25 b.c. to a.d. 43 and then being merged with Lycia into the province of Pamphylia-Lycia from a.d. 43–68. Perga could be reached by traveling seven miles up the Cestrus River from the Mediterranean port of Attalia and then going about five miles west by foot to Perga. The Cestrus is not navigable in this area today, and it may not have been in Paul's day. If not, the missionaries would have landed at Attalia and traveled by foot to Perga.¹¹⁹⁹ At this point Perga seems to have been only a stopping place on their journey. On their return trip they would preach there (14:25).

At Perga, John Mark decided to leave them, and he returned home to Jerusalem. Just why he did so has long been a fruitful subject for speculation.²²⁰⁰ Was he intimidated by the prospect of the arduous and dangerous task of crossing the Taurus mountains to reach Antioch? Was he angered that Paul was assuming more and more authority and forcing his cousin Barnabas to a lesser role? Did he contract malaria in the Pamphylian lowlands? Did he disagree with Paul's concept of a law-free mission to the Gentiles? All of these have been suggested; none can be substantiated. Luke was simply silent on the reason. He did clarify that it was a serious matter for Paul, serious enough to create a falling out with Barnabas on a subsequent occasion (cf. 15:37f.).

Luke's note that they went from Perga to Pisidian Antioch is extremely terse, and one is apt to miss the difficulty of the trek. Antioch lay some 100 miles to the north across the Taurus mountain range. The route was barren, often flooded by swollen mountain streams, and notorious for its bandits, which even the Romans had difficulty bringing under control.²²¹¹ Antioch itself was in the highlands, some 3,600 feet above sea level. It

¹⁹¹⁹ F. J. Foakes-Jackson and K. Lake, eds., *The Beginnings of Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1922), 4:147; 5:224.

²⁰²⁰ For the view that it was youthful rebellion at a change of Paul's plans, see T. J. Pennell, "Acts xiii, 13," *ExpTim* 44 (1932–33): 476; R. Hughes, "Acts xiii, 13," *ExpTim* 45 (1933–34): 44f. W. Ramsay argued that Paul contracted malaria at Perga and that he changed an original plan to go to Ephesus in order to reach the highlands of Antioch for relief (*St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1897], 89–97).

²¹²¹ Foakes-Jackson, *Acts*, 114.

was one of the sixteen cities named Antioch that had been established around 300 b.c. by Seleucus Nikator in honor of his father Antiochus. Although referred to as “Pisidian Antioch” to distinguish it from the others, it was actually in Phrygia but just across the border from Pisidia. In Paul’s day it belonged to the Roman province of Galatia and was the leading city of the southern part of the province, having the status of a “colony city” with its privileges of local autonomy and exemption from imperial taxes. The Seleucid rulers had moved many Jews to the city, and there was a large Jewish population there.²²²²

13:14–16 As was their custom, Paul and Barnabas went first to the synagogue in the city. The Diaspora synagogue was more than a house of worship. It was the hub of the Jewish community—house of worship, center of education, judicial center, social gathering place, general “civic center” for the Jewish community. If one wished to make contact with the Jewish community in a town, the synagogue was the natural place to begin. It was also the natural place to begin if one wished to share the Christian message. Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah, and it was natural to share him with “the Jews first.” There had perhaps been an arrangement already for Paul to speak that day, as the invitation from the rulers of the synagogue would suggest (v. 15b). Usually a synagogue had only one ruling elder, but evidence suggests that the title was retained by those who formerly served as well as sometimes being conferred strictly as an honor, which explains why it occurs sometimes in the plural, as here.²²³³ The ruling elder was responsible for worship, appointing lay members to lead in prayer and read the Scripture lessons. He also would invite suitable persons to deliver the homily on the day’s Scripture when such were available. The form of the service as depicted in v. 15 is exactly that known from rabbinic sources, the sermon following the readings from the

²²²² On Antioch see W. Ramsay, *The Cities of St. Paul* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), 247–96.

²³²³ *Beginnings* 4:149.

Law and the Prophets.²²⁴⁴ There seem to have been a number of styles of homilies, but one that linked the Torah and prophetic texts together was considered ideal. One is tempted to try to derive the texts on which Paul expounded in Pisidian Antioch. Deuteronomy 1:1–3:22 for the Torah (*sefer*) and Isa 1:1–22 for the prophetic text (*haphtarah*) were suggested by Ramsay.²²⁵⁵ More recently J. Bowker has suggested Deut 4:25–46 as the *sefer* and 2 Sam 7:6–16 as the *haftarah*, with 1 Sam 13:14 as the “*proem* text,” that is, the text that links the two together.²²⁶⁶

(2) The Sermon (13:16b–41)

“Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! ¹⁷The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country, ¹⁸he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, ¹⁹he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. ²⁰All this took about 450 years.

“After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. ²¹Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. ²²After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: ‘I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.’

²⁴²⁴ There was a set cycle of readings for 154 Sabbaths used in Palestine and the Western Diaspora. The service consisted of six basic parts. First was the recitation of the basic confession, the Shema, based on Deut 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Num 15:37–41. Then followed prayers, including the Shemoneh’esreh, or “eighteen benedictions.” Third came the Torah-reading from the books of the Law, usually divided into portions and read by several laypersons. Fourth was a reading from the Prophets. In Palestine this was usually followed by a paraphrase of the readings from an Aramaic Targum. Fifth was a homily on the day’s readings, which was optional, depending on the availability of a suitable speaker. Finally came the priestly blessing based on Num 6:22–26, or, in the absence of a priest, a benediction pronounced by the ruler of the synagogue. E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, trans. S. Taylor and P. Christie, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1892) 2:447–54.

²⁵²⁵ Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller*, 100.

²⁶²⁶ J. W. Bowker, “Speeches in Acts: A Study in Proem and Yelammedenu Form,” *NTS* 14 (1967–68): 96–111.

²³“From this man’s descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. ²⁴Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. ²⁵As John was completing his work, he said: ‘Who do you think I am? I am not that one. No, but he is coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.’

²⁶“Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. ²⁷The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. ²⁸Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. ²⁹When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰But God raised him from the dead, ³¹and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

³²“We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers ³³he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:

“ ‘You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.’

³⁴The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words:

“ ‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’

³⁵So it is stated elsewhere:

“ ‘You will not let your Holy One see decay.’

³⁶“For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. ³⁷But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

³⁸“Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. ³⁹Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. ⁴⁰Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:

⁴¹“ ‘Look, you scoffers,
wonder and perish,

for I am going to do something in your days

that you would never believe,

even if someone told you.’ ”

It is instructive to compare Paul’s sermon in Pisidian Antioch with the other speeches in Acts. It has much in common with Peter’s speeches—the emphasis on the Jerusalem Jews’ responsibility for Jesus’ death, the contrast between the death on the cross and the triumph of the resurrection, the apostolic witness, the proofs from Scripture (even some of the same texts), and the call to repentance. One would expect many of the same emphases. This, as with most of Peter’s sermons, was a speech to Jews. Paul’s sermons to Gentiles (chaps. 14; 17) would be radically different. This sermon has a feature in common also with Stephen’s speech—namely, the long introductory sketch of Jewish history. There is a radically different function for the historical sketches in the two speeches, however. Stephen used Old Testament history to depict the rebelliousness of the Jews toward their divinely appointed leaders. Paul used it to show God’s faithfulness to his promises for Israel, promises that were ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

The speech falls into three main parts. Verses 16b–25 provide a sketch of Old Testament history that emphasizes God’s providence and promise to Israel. Verses 26–37 demonstrate by means of apostolic witness and scriptural proof how those promises are fulfilled in Christ. Finally, vv. 38–41 issue an invitation to accept the promises and a warning against rejecting God’s marvelous deed in Christ.

The Promise to Israel (13:16b–25)

13:16b–21 Paul was aware of two groups in his congregation and addressed them both—“men of Israel” and “Gentiles who worship God” (vv. 16b, 26).²²⁷⁷ It was to the first group that the primary content of the sermon was addressed. It was from the second group that he would receive the most positive response. The keynote of Paul’s sketch of Old Testament history was God’s mercy to Israel, his acts of lovingkindness. This is particularly to be seen in the verbs he used to depict each stage of history. God “chose” the patriarchs (*eklegomai*, “elected,” v. 17). He “made the people prosper” in Egypt (*hypsoō*, “exalted,” v. 17). He “led them out” (*exagō*, v. 17) of Egypt. He “endured their

²²⁷⁷ Despite Kraabel’s objections, the terms φοβούμενοι and σεβόμενοι do often seem to designate pious Gentiles who worship God, especially in such contexts as v. 50, where σεβομένους are set over against “Jews.” See A. T. Kraabel, “Greeks, Jews, and Lutherans in the Middle Half of Acts,” *HTR* 79 (1986): 147–57.

conduct,” or “cared for them in the wilderness” (v. 18).²²⁸⁸ He “gave the land of Canaan to them as an inheritance” (*kataklēronomeō*, v. 19). He “gave” them judges (v. 20).²²⁹⁹ Upon their request he “gave” them Saul as king (v. 21).³³⁰⁰ Finally, he “made” (literally “raised up,” *egeiren*) David as king (v. 22). No point is dwelt upon until we get to David. All the stress is on God’s mercy—his election of Israel, his exaltation of his people, his gift of an inheritance in the promised land, his gift of rulers and kings.

13:22–23 The pace slows with David because this is the point Paul wanted to stress. God “raised up” David, a common Old Testament expression for God bringing forth a prophet or ruler to serve his people but also an expression for Jesus’ resurrection. The parallelism may not be accidental, for in a real sense David and the promises to him foreshadow the promise fulfilled in Christ. David was a special expression of God’s mercy, a man who fulfilled all God’s will for him, a man after God’s own heart.³³¹¹ David also received a special promise from God, a promise of a descendant who would be God’s own Son and with whom he would establish a kingdom that would last forever. This promise was embodied in Nathan’s prophecy to David (2 Sam 7:12–16). It lies behind v. 23 with its reference to God’s promise. The promised descendant of David was Jesus the Savior. This promise to David had been the goal of Paul’s entire historical sketch. It would continue to be the main subject of Paul’s sermon as he showed how Christ fulfilled the promise.

13:24–25 The verses dealing with John the Baptist are difficult to place on an outline of Paul’s sermon (vv. 24–25). Should they go with the opening sketch of Israel’s history

²⁸²⁸ There are variants in the LXX as well as Acts between the verbs προποφορέω (“put up with”) and προφοφορέω (“treat gently like a nurse”). The Hebrew of Deut 1:31 (אֲשַׁר) has the same ambiguity. See R. P. Gordon, “Targumic Parallels to Acts xiii, 18 and Didache xiv, 3” *NovT* 16 (1974): 285–89.

²⁹²⁹ The reference to 450 years seems to cover the period of the Egyptian sojourn to the time of the judges, allowing 400 years in Egypt, forty in the wilderness, and ten for the conquest. The Western text reads, “There were judges for 450 years,” but this conflicts with the OT. See *Beginnings* 4:150–51.

³⁰³⁰ The tradition that Saul was king for forty years is not given in the OT but does not conflict with the OT evidence and is found in Josephus, *Ant.* 6.378 (eighteen years during Samuel’s lifetime and twenty-two more after his death).

³¹³¹ The quote in v. 22 is a mixed quote based on three passages: “I have found David” (Ps 89:20), “a man after my own heart” (1 Sam 13:14), “who will do everything I want him to do” (Isa 44:28). For “son of Jesse,” cf. 1 Sam 16:1.

(vv. 16–23) or with the section on God’s sending Jesus (vv. 26–37)? Does John belong with the period of Israel or the period of Christ? The very fact that John was placed between these two major sections of the speech emphasizes his transitional role. John was the eschatological messenger, the last in the line of Old Testament prophets, who heralded the coming of the Messiah. He was the link-figure, joining together the period of Israel and the period of God’s new community in Christ. The outline followed here places John with the section on Israel’s history because the structure of Paul’s speech seems to do so. The key is Paul’s address to his hearers (“brothers,” etc.). The speech contains three direct addresses (vv. 16, 26, 38), and each seems to mark a transition to a major division in the sermon.

The references to Jesus’ being the “coming” one in vv. 24–25 may reflect the prophecy of Mal 3:1, which looks to the sending of God’s messenger as a herald to the coming of the Lord. Contemporary Judaism interpreted Mal 3:1 messianically, and throughout the New Testament John is depicted in this role of the herald, the forerunner of the Messiah Jesus. John’s message and his baptizing were both aimed at the repentance of the people in preparation for the coming Messiah (cf. Mark 1:4). John’s denial that he was the Messiah and his statement that he was unworthy to perform even the slave’s task of untying the “coming” one’s sandals (v. 25) is found in all four Gospels (cf. Matt 3:11; Mark 1:7; Luke 3:15f.; John 1:27). Here in Paul’s speech it appears in wording that is closest to that of John’s Gospel (cf. John 1:20f., 27).³³²² Quite possibly Paul’s listeners in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch had heard about John the Baptist. A few years later Paul encountered a group of the Baptist’s disciples even further to the west in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–7). Paul wanted his hearers to see John’s role in its proper perspective. John was in every way subordinate to the one whose coming he proclaimed. But he was a first bold *witness* to the coming of the Messiah.

The Promise Fulfilled in Christ (13:26–37)

13:26 There may be a distant echo of Ps 107:20 in v. 26. In any event, it is a key verse, linked directly with the reference to God’s sending the promised “Savior” Jesus in v. 23. That had been the whole point of the opening section of Paul’s sermon—God’s mercy to Israel from the patriarchs to David, especially as epitomized in the promise to David that he would send a descendant whose kingdom would have no end.³³³³ Now that promise

³²²² See C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), 253–56.

³³³³ See G. W. McRae, “Whom Heaven Must Receive Until the Time,” *Int* 27 (1973): 151–65.

had been fulfilled in the Savior Jesus; now that message of salvation had been sent. Jesus was the Son of David; it was above all to David's own people, the people chosen in Abraham (v. 17), the Jews, that God had sent the Messiah and the message of salvation in him. Paul addressed a synagogue consisting of Jewish listeners and devout God-worshipping Gentiles who identified closely with the Jewish faith and looked to the promises given to Israel. The tragedy of this speech would be that the Jews, the very ones to whom the Messiah had first been sent, would ultimately reject this message of salvation (13:45f.).

13:27–28 Verses 27–31 tell the story of Jesus' rejection, death, and resurrection in the basic kerygmatic form already familiar from Peter's speeches earlier in Acts. The people of Jerusalem, and especially their rulers, did not recognize Jesus as their God-sent Messiah. What they did to him was done in ignorance (cf. 3:17). And yet, in condemning him to death, they unknowingly fulfilled the prophecies that the Messiah must suffer and die (cf. Luke 24:46; Acts 3:18). The irony of it all was that they were the very ones who should have understood who Jesus was, who read those very prophecies in their synagogues every sabbath (v. 27b). Paul highly compressed his summary. His reference to their finding no real legal basis for the death penalty (v. 28a) recalls Pilate's protest of Jesus' innocence (cf. Luke 23:4; Acts 3:13).

13:29–30 Verses 29–30 complete the gospel summary, noting that the Jews of Jerusalem fulfilled all that the prophets had written concerning his suffering and death.³⁴⁴ Like Peter, Paul referred to Christ's crucifixion as hanging on "a tree" (5:30; 10:39; Gal 3:13). His compression of the story is particularly evident in his referring to "their" taking him down from the cross and laying him in the tomb, which could be taken to refer to the Jews of Jerusalem. The reference is, of course, to Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:53) and Nicodemus (John 19:38–42). The removal of the body and its placement in the tomb underlines the full reality of the death of Christ. He was dead and buried (cf. 1 Cor 15:4). This heightens the contrast with the next statement: God raised him from the dead.³⁵⁵ The emphasis on the burial also prepares for the explanation of Ps 16:10 in vv. 34–37. It is the contrast between the seeming defeat of the cross and

³⁴³⁴ The servant psalms, especially Isa 52:13–53:12, would be especially in mind. Cf. Luke 18:31; 22:37; 24:44–46; Acts 8:32.

³⁵³⁵ That Jesus rose "from the dead" (ἐκ νεκρῶν) is a familiar confessional formula found throughout the NT: with ἐγείρω in Luke 9:7; Acts 3:15; 4:10; 13:30; Rom 4:24; 6:4; 7:4; 8:1; 1 Cor 15:4; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:20; Col 2:12; 1 Thess 1:10; 2 Tim 2:8; Heb 11:19; 1 Pet 1:21; with ἀνίστημι in Acts 13:34; 17:31.

the victory of the resurrection so familiar in Peter's speeches: "You killed him but God raised him" (cf. 2:24; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:39f.).

13:31 The kerygmatic portion of Paul's speech ends with the familiar reference to the apostolic witness (cf. 1:8; 2:32; 3:15). It is striking that Paul did not include himself among these witnesses. But here it was not just the resurrection he wished to emphasize but the entire Christ event, embracing the journey from Galilee and the witness to his crucifixion (cf. Luke 23:49, 55; Acts 1:13f.) as well as the whole forty-day period of his resurrection appearances (Acts 1:3). Above all the Twelve could attest to these events (cf. Acts 1:21f.). But another "witness" to these things was the testimony of the Scriptures. To these Scripture proofs Paul now turned.

13:32–33a Just as Peter's sermons to the Jews relied heavily on Old Testament texts that were shown to have their fulfillment in Jesus, so now in vv. 32–37 Paul turned to the Scriptures to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah who fulfilled the promise to David. In that generation ("to us their children," said Paul) God accomplished his promise to David. This he did by "raising up" Jesus. The expression "raising up" could be connected with God's bringing Jesus onto the stage of history. It is the same verb (*egeiren*) used in v. 22 for God's "raising up" David as king ("made ... king"). In the immediate context, however, the emphasis is on the resurrection of Jesus. By the *resurrection* of Jesus, God demonstrated that he had truly accomplished his promise by bringing forth the Son who abides forever.

13:33b–34 Paul quoted three Old Testament texts that establish Jesus as the one who fulfills the promise. The first is Ps 2:7, a psalm that already in contemporary Judaism was applied to the Messiah and was itself based on the Nathan prophecy of 2 Sam 7.³⁶³⁶ God said to the Messiah: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" (Acts 13:33). To what does "today" refer? In the context Paul seems to have been implying the day of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus was indeed the Son of God from all eternity and recognized as such throughout his earthly life (Luke 1:35; 3:22; 9:35). But it was through the resurrection that he was exalted to God's right hand, enthroned as Son of God, and recognized as such by believing humans. It was through the resurrection that he was declared Son of God *with power* (Rom 1:4). Paul's second Old Testament text, Isa 55:3, also relates to the Nathan prophecy of 2 Sam 7:4–17: "I will give to you

³⁶³⁶ Psalm 2:7 is also applied to Jesus' resurrection in Heb 1:5; 5:5. See R. O'Toole, "Christ's Resurrection in Acts 13, 13–52," *Bib* 60 (1979): 361–72. The promise of 2 Sam 7 lies behind the entire argument here; see D. Goldsmith, "Acts 13, 33–37: A Peshet on 2 Samuel 7," *JBL* 87 (1968): 321–24. See also E. Lovestam, *A Study of Acts 13:32–37* (Lund: Gleerup, 1961), 37–48.

the holy and sure blessings promised to David.” It is somewhat more difficult to determine the exact purpose of this quotation in the total argument, but Paul gave a key in introducing the verse by saying that it established that God raised Jesus from the dead, never to decay. The “holy and sure” blessings to David are God’s promise that he would establish in his descendant an eternal throne, a kingdom that would last forever (cf. 2 Sam 7:13, 16).³³⁷⁷ But God’s promise was not fulfilled in David, who did not himself enjoy an eternal reign.

13:35–37 The final Old Testament text, Ps 16:10, is quoted in v. 35 to establish this.³³⁸⁸ The text of the psalm refers to God’s Holy One who will not suffer decay. Peter also cited this same text in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:25–28). Paul applied it in much the same fashion. David could not have been speaking about himself in the psalm because he died, was buried, and his body decayed (v. 36; cf. 2:29–31). Only the one whom God raised from the dead escaped death and decay. Paul’s argument had come full circle. Only by virtue of the resurrection of Jesus were the promises to David fulfilled. Jesus is God’s Holy One who saw no decay. He is the one who received the sure and holy promises to David. He is the Son of God whose throne is forever. Paul’s witness was now complete. Apostles and Scripture attested to the resurrection of Jesus in fulfillment of the promises to David. It now only remained for his hearers to accept him as the promised Savior (v. 23).

Appeal to Accept the Promise (13:38–41)

13:38–39 With the third address to his Jewish “brothers” in the synagogue, Paul turned to the final and most important part of his sermon—the call to repentance. Throughout the sermon he had appealed to God’s constant acts of mercy. Now he offered God’s greatest act of mercy, the forgiveness of sins through Jesus.³³⁹⁹ The next statement,

³⁷³⁷ See J. Pillai, *Apostolic Interpretation of History: A Commentary on Acts 13:16–41* (Hicksville, N.Y.: Exposition, 1980), 83–87; E. Schweizer, “The Concept of the Davidic Son of God,” *Studies in Luke-Acts*, 186–93. Dupont stresses the phrase “to you” in v. 34 and sees Paul’s point as being that God will give “to you [believers]” the holy promises to David—forgiveness, justification, and service: “Ta Hosia David ta Pista (Acts 13, 34=Isaie 55:3),” *Etudes sur les Actes des Apôtres* (Paris: Cerf, 1967), 337–59.

³⁸³⁸ In the Greek text of verses 34–35 there is a word linkage in the words “give” (δῶσω, δῶσεις) and “holy” (ῥοσια, ῥοσιον), suggesting that the two texts may have already been linked in a collection of OT Christological testimonies.

³⁹³⁹ Throughout Luke-Acts, the work of Christ is described in terms of the forgiveness of sins: Luke 1:77; 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 26:18. It is often argued that this

which is a fuller explication of the forgiveness of sins, could hardly be more Pauline: “Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (v. 39). “Through him” recalls Paul’s favorite phrase, “in Christ.” “Everyone who believes” is reminiscent of Paul’s constant emphasis on the sole necessity of faith in Christ. Justification was his favorite term for describing the saving work of Christ. It is a law-court term and carries the idea of being acceptable to God. Through faith in Christ, one is “put right with God” and becomes acceptable to him. The idea is that the law of Moses could never serve as a basis for acceptability to God.⁴⁴⁰⁰ Only in Christ is one truly “justified,” forgiven of sin, and acceptable to God.

13:40–41 Having begun his appeal with an invitation, Paul concluded with a warning. His warning took the form of a quote from Hab 1:5, which originally had warned Israel of King Nebuchadnezzar’s rise to power and the threat of an invasion from Babylon if the nation failed to repent. In the present context the threat seems to be that God would once again have to bring judgment upon his people if they failed to accept the mercy and forgiveness now offered to them in Jesus. If they continued in their rejection, they would be rejected. It is remarkable how quickly Paul’s warning came to bear. In the ensuing narrative, Habakkuk’s prophecy was once again fulfilled—among the Jews of Pisidian Antioch, as they rejected the words of salvation. God did something they would never have dreamed of—he turned to the Gentiles.⁴⁴¹¹

(3) *The Sermon’s Aftermath (13:42–52)*

⁴²As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. ⁴³When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

concept is not found in Paul. It is, however, very much involved in his whole idea of justification. Cf. also such explicit references as Rom 4:7; Col 1:14; Eph 1:7.

⁴⁰⁴⁰ Some interpreters take v. 39 to mean that the law could atone for some sins, but not for all, and that Christ justifies us in those areas where the law fails. This idea is totally alien to Paul’s thought and is found nowhere else in Luke-Acts. The more “absolute” meaning seems to apply best: the law can never set us right with God; only Christ can. See F. F. Bruce, “Justification by Faith in the Non-Pauline Writings of the New Testament,” *EvQ* 24 (1952): 69–71.

⁴¹⁴¹ See D. Moessner, “Paul in Acts: Preacher of Eschatological Repentance to Israel,” *NTS* 34 (1988): 101.

⁴⁴On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.

⁴⁶Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “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. ⁴⁷For 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.’ ”**

⁴⁸When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

⁴⁹The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. ⁵⁰But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. ⁵¹So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. ⁵²And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

13:42–43 Paul’s synagogue audience was at first favorably impressed by what he had to say. On first sight vv. 42–43 seem almost to be doublets, but they probably are best viewed as sequential. At the conclusion of the service, as they were all exiting, the congregation urged Paul and Barnabas to return for a further exposition on “these things” the next Sabbath (v. 42). At this point they expressed a somewhat detached interest. When next Sabbath arrived, they would become anything but detached. Others in the congregation showed a genuine interest in the witness of Paul and Barnabas, following them and talking with them as they left the synagogue (v. 43). Among these were both Jews and “devout converts.”⁴²⁴² The latter were undoubtedly proselytes, Gentiles who had become full converts to Judaism. Other Gentiles in the congregation had believed in and worshiped God but had not yet undergone the rites like circumcision, which would qualify them as converts (cf. vv. 16, 26). Some of these also may have been among this group who showed a keener interest in Paul and Barnabas’s testimony. The two missionaries urged them to continue along the path they had started and to remain open to the grace of God (v. 43b).

⁴²⁴² Luke spoke of *σεβομένων προσηλύτων*, which Foakes-Jackson suggests may indicate that *καί* has dropped out, the original reading referring to two distinct groups of God-fearers and proselytes (*Acts*, 120).

13:44–45 When next Sabbath arrived and Paul and Barnabas returned to the synagogue in accordance with the Jews’ invitation, the situation rapidly deteriorated. “Almost the whole city” had gathered to hear the Christian missionaries (v. 44). Because Pisidian Antioch was predominantly Gentile, this would indicate that the Jews were considerably eclipsed by the large numbers of Gentiles who came to hear Paul’s witness. Evidently the “God-fearing Gentiles” who had heard Paul’s sermon the previous Sabbath had understood that the salvation he proclaimed in Christ included *them*. The word had spread like wildfire through the Gentile populace, and they were there en masse. The Jews were filled with jealousy and began to speak abusively against the things Paul was saying, perhaps even blaspheming the gospel itself (v. 45).⁴⁴³³ The reason for their sudden change in receptivity was evident: their “jealousy” was over the presence of all these Gentiles. It was one thing to proclaim the coming of the Messiah to the Jews. It was quite another to maintain that in the Messiah God accepted the Gentiles on an equal basis. To them this was little short of blasphemy, and Paul’s witness to them was over.

13:46–48 Paul and Barnabas responded “boldly” (v. 46). The reference to “bold witness” generally appears in contexts that emphasize the inspiration of the Spirit behind the testimony, and that is most likely implied here.⁴⁴⁴⁴ Paul was led to a decisive turning point. The Jews had rejected the gospel that embraces all people without distinction. Paul had to focus his attention on those who were receptive—the Gentiles. Since Jesus was the Messiah who fulfilled God’s promise to the Jews, it was essential to proclaim the gospel to the Jews *first* (cf. vv. 26, 32f.).⁴⁴⁵⁵ But the Jews in Antioch had rejected the eternal life that is to be found in Jesus, and Paul had to turn to those who were “worthy”

⁴³⁴³ The Greek reads literally “blaspheming, they spoke against the things said by Paul.” Although the word “blaspheme” is used in some NT contexts for slander against persons (cf. Acts 18:6), it is usually used of blasphemy against God or Jesus, and that may be the implication here (cf. Luke 22:65; 23:39; Acts 26:11).

⁴⁴⁴⁴ Cf. 4:8 (“filled with the Holy Spirit”) with the bold witness in 4:13, 19, 31. Cf. 9:17 with 9:27, 29. Behind this concept of bold witness is the promise of Jesus (Luke 21:13–15).

⁴⁵⁴⁵ Cf. the similar concept of “to the Jew first” in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (1:16; 2:9f.; 3:1–4).

(v. 46).⁴⁴⁶⁶ Paul backed his decision to turn to the Gentiles by quoting Isa 49:6, an Old Testament text that was “programmatically” for the Christian mission in Acts (Acts 1:8; 26:23; cf. Luke 24:47). The text of Isaiah, a “servant” passage, originally envisaged Israel’s destiny as being that of a witness to God to all the nations of the world. As Servant-Messiah, Jesus fulfilled this divine destiny. He was to be “a light to the nations.”⁴⁴⁷⁷ Now, the messengers of the Messiah are likewise commanded to be “a light for the Gentiles” (v. 47). The Jews of Pisidian Antioch could not accept a Messiah who embraced the Gentiles. In rejecting Paul’s witness to the Gentiles, they thus rejected their Messiah as well.

Verses 46–48 are programmatic for Paul’s mission in Acts, establishing a pattern that would appear again and again. One could view the present statement as definitive: Paul would no longer turn to the Jews; he would now witness only to Gentiles. Such was not the case. In the very next city on his missionary itinerary he would again begin his witness in the synagogue (14:1).⁴⁴⁸⁸ Again and again he experienced the rejection of the Jews and turned to the Gentiles of that town. But he never gave up on his fellow Jews. It was very much the problem he wrestled with in Rom 9–11. In spite of the overwhelming rejection of the gospel by his own people, Paul could not bring himself to believe that the rejection was final and that God had deserted them. His great successes in witness were indeed among the Gentiles, but he never abandoned his witness to Jews. The ambiguity of the witness to the Jews persists to the very end of Acts and is never definitively settled (cf. 28:17–28). The contemporary church can learn from Paul’s persistence. His actions caution against a mission policy that only targets those who are most receptive to the gospel message.

13:48 The *Gentiles* of Pisidian Antioch were those who accepted Paul’s message, honoring (glorifying) the word of the Lord (v. 48). Perhaps it was the specific “word” of Isa 49:6 they praised, with its good news that the light of Christ and his salvation extended to Gentiles such as they. Many of them believed, accepting Christ as Savior. They were those who were “appointed for eternal life.” In this phrase we encounter the same balance between human volition and divine providence that is found throughout

⁴⁶⁴⁶ Behind the expression “eternal life” (ζωή αἰώνιος) lies the OT concept of sharing in the life of the age to come, God’s eschatological kingdom. It is essentially the same as “salvation” (cf. v. 26). Cf. Acts 11:18; Luke 10:25; 18:18, 30.

⁴⁷⁴⁷ See J. Dupont, “Je t’ai établi lumière des nations (Ac. 13, 14; 43–52),” *Nouvelles Etudes*, 347–49. Cf. P. Grelot, “Note sur Actes xiii, 47,” *RB* (1981): 368–72.

⁴⁸⁴⁸ See also 16:13; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8.

Acts. On their part these Gentiles took an active role in believing, in committing themselves to Christ; but it was in response to God's Spirit moving in them, convicting them, appointing them for life. All salvation is ultimately only by the grace of God.

13:49–52 The Antioch mission ended on a mixed note of both opposition and success. On the one hand, the gospel was well received by the Gentiles and spread throughout the whole region.⁴⁴⁹⁹ On the other hand, the rejection by the Jews became even stronger and broke out in outright persecution of Paul and Barnabas. Evidently the opposition was spearheaded by some of the Gentile women who attended the synagogue. Both Josephus and Strabo attested to the fact that many Gentile women were attracted to the Jewish religion in the Diaspora, attending the synagogues and even becoming proselytes.⁵⁵⁰⁰ Just who the “leading men” were whom they incited is not clear. Evidently they were Gentiles who had sufficient social standing or political power to force the departure of Paul and Barnabas.⁵⁵¹¹ In any event, Paul and Barnabas followed the directions given by Jesus for dealing with an unreceptive town: they shook the dust of the city off their feet as they departed.⁵⁵²² The gesture had a certain irony about it. The rabbis attested to the Jewish practice of shaking the dust off their feet when they returned from a sojourn in Gentile territory, symbolizing their leaving their defilement behind as they stepped on the “holy land” once again. Paul and Barnabas's dust-shaking symbolized their ridding themselves of all responsibility for the unreceptive Jews. The gesture, however, did not apply to everyone in Antioch. Not all had been unreceptive, and the story ends on a positive note. There were many Gentile converts in Antioch, and these new disciples rejoiced in their experience in the Holy Spirit and their newfound acceptance in Christ.

4. Acceptance and Rejection at Iconium (14:1–7)

⁴⁹⁴⁹ Ramsay (*Traveller*, 104) argued that χώρα is used here in a technical sense of the whole district officially under the jurisdiction of Antioch. Χώρα, however, does not bear this meaning in other places in Acts (cf. 16:6; 18:23).

⁵⁰⁵⁰ Josephus (*War* 2.561) said that a majority of the women in Damascus had become Jewish converts. In his sixth satire (542), Juvenal complained of the addiction of the Roman women to the Jewish religion. See Robertson, *WP* 3:201.

⁵¹⁵¹ Ramsay (*The Cities of St. Paul*, 313) suggested that the leading men were the magistrates of the city.

⁵²⁵² Cf. Luke 10:11. For a full discussion of this gesture, see *Beginnings* 5:266–77.

¹At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. ²But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. ⁵There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. ⁶But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, ⁷where they continued to preach the good news.

14:1 The pattern of a mixed response set in Pisidian Antioch again greeted the missionaries at their next place of witness, Iconium.⁵³⁵³ It was no easy journey. Iconium was some ninety miles southeast of Antioch by the Sebastian way, the main route that connected Ephesus with Syria and Mesopotamia. Iconium was located on a plateau 3,370 feet in elevation. In many ways the city was strongly Hellenized because it had been under Seleucid rule during the second and third centuries before Christ. In Paul's day the Roman influence was particularly in evidence, as is indicated by the name Claudiconium, which was granted to it in a.d. 41 by the emperor Claudius. It was considered a particular honor for a city to be given the right to bear the emperor's name. In short, at Iconium Paul and Barnabas encountered a cultural amalgam—native Phrygians whose ancestors had occupied the area from ancient times, Greeks and Jews who dated back to the Seleucid period (312–65 b.c.), and Roman colonists whose presence dated from more recent times. Geographically it was the most ideal place for

⁵³⁵³ Streams from the mountains irrigated the level plains to the east of the city, making it a flourishing agricultural area in an otherwise arid region. Particularly noted for its orchards and woolen industry, it was an important commercial center, since several major trade routes conjoined with the via Sebaste at Iconium. Located in the ancient region of Phrygia, it had been incorporated by the Romans into the province of Galatia in 25 B.C. The ancient literary sources are somewhat divided about whether Iconium was in Pisidia or Lycaonia. It seems to have been located on the border of the two areas but inside Phrygian territory, as has been shown by Ramsay (*Cities of St. Paul*, 317–70). For a description of Iconium, see also M. F. Unger, "Archaeology and Paul's Visit to Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe," *BibSac* 118 (1961): 107–12.

human settlement in an otherwise desolate area, and there is evidence for a town there from ancient times right down to the present.⁵⁵⁴⁴

14:1–3 In setting up their witness in the major city of the area, the two missionaries followed a pattern Paul would continue to follow—establishing his work in the major population centers. Paul and Barnabas began their work in the usual manner.⁵⁵⁵⁵ They went first to the Jewish synagogue. Even though Paul’s words in Pisidian Antioch had a somewhat definitive ring to them about turning to the Gentiles (13:46), they evidently only applied to that city. Throughout Acts, Paul’s usual method would be to go first to the synagogues. There was wisdom to this. For one, Paul never gave up on the Jews. There would be some who would hear gladly the message of Messiah’s coming. Also there would be present in the synagogues Gentile proselytes and other Gentiles who believed in God and would be particularly open to the inclusive Christian message. Indeed, v. 1 attests to Paul and Barnabas having success among both these groups, Jews as well as Gentiles. Verse 2, however, points to a reaction from the nonbelieving Jews. Not only did they resist the missionaries’ witness themselves, but they also poisoned the minds of the Gentile populace against the Christian witnesses.⁵⁵⁶⁶ Verse 3 creates something of a problem. One wonders why Luke said “so” Paul and Barnabas spent a long time in Iconium after such opposition had erupted against them. Verse 4 would seem to follow more naturally on v. 2 with its note of the city being divided against the apostles, and some scholars have concluded that v. 3 is a later scribal addition and

⁵⁴⁵⁴ The modern Konya is located on the site of ancient Iconium.

⁵⁵⁵⁵ The Greek (κατὰ τὸ αὐτὸ) could be construed like ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ and translated “Paul and Barnabas *together* entered the synagogue.” The NIV rendering “as usual” is preferable. Luke was pointing to their general pattern of going first to the Jews.

⁵⁵⁶⁶ Behind “poison their minds” is the verb κακῶω, which usually has the meaning *to ill-treat* but which can also have the meaning *to embitter someone against someone else*. Cf. Ps 106 (LXX 105): 32. This picture of the Gentile opposition to the Christians in Iconium is greatly elaborated in “The Acts of Paul and Thecla,” a second-century piece of Christian fiction with a pronounced ascetic tendency. The deacon who wrote the work was removed from office for producing it, and it is probably wise not to use it for elucidating Paul’s ministry in Iconium, as some commentators are tempted to do (cf. Rackham, *Acts*, 226–27).

not part of the original text of Acts.⁵⁷⁷ It is not necessary to do so. Verse 3 is in deliberate tension with the preceding and emphasizes the power of the Christian witness and the divine enabling behind it. Even though there was strong resistance to the Christians (v. 2), still they were able to maintain their witness. The two apostles were not about to back down. They had the power of the Holy Spirit to speak “boldly” for the Lord (cf. 4:29–31). Far from being intimidated, they were inspired to even bolder witness.

14:4 As the apostles continued their witness, the city became more and more polarized into those who supported them and those who opposed them (v. 4). It is noteworthy that Luke used the term “apostle” here to refer to Paul and Barnabas. Here and 14:14 are the only places where he applied the term to anyone other than the Twelve disciples. The word means literally *one who is sent* and is used of official delegates or emissaries. Paul used the term regularly to refer to his own commission as an emissary of Christ. He applied the term to others as well: James, the Lord’s brother (Gal 1:19; 1 Cor 15:7), Andronicus and Junias (Rom 16:7), and an unnamed group whom he distinguished from the Twelve (1 Cor 15:7; cf. 15:5). In Acts, Luke used the term in a restricted sense, which denotes only the Twelve who were eyewitnesses to Jesus’ entire ministry.⁵⁸⁸ Acts 14:4, 14 are the exceptions to the rule. Perhaps Luke indicated here that Paul and Barnabas were delegates of the Antioch church, commissioned by them for their mission. Perhaps it indicates Luke’s awareness of the wider application of the word and that he here slipped into the more customary and less specialized usage.

14:5–7 The opposition to the two grew to such a point that a plot was hatched to stone them (v. 5). It does not seem to have been a question of official synagogue stoning since the Gentile populace was equally involved with the Jews. The whole picture seems to have been one of mob violence rather than expulsion by the city officials, as

⁵⁷⁵⁷ So conservative a scholar as Ramsay argued this (*St. Paul the Traveller*, 107–09). Moffatt solved the problem by transposing vv. 2–3 in his translation. The Western scribes of Codex Bezae made explicit what is already implicit in v. 3, adding “the Lord gave them peace.” One scholar even suggests moving v. 3 to the middle of v. 48 in chap. 13 (J. H. Michael, “The Original Position of Acts xiv, 3,” *ExpTim* 40 [1929–30]: 514–16). For the view that $\mu\epsilon\nu\ \omicron\upsilon\tilde{\nu}$ should be translated not as “therefore” but as “rather,” see D. S. Sharp, “The Meaning of $\mu\epsilon\nu\ \omicron\upsilon\tilde{\nu}$ in Acts xiv, 3,” *ExpTim* 44 (1932–33): 528.

⁵⁸⁵⁸ For bibliography and further discussion, see chap. I, n. 61.

was the case in Pisidian Antioch (13:50).⁵⁵⁹⁹ In any event, Paul and Barnabas learned of the plot and fled to the nearby towns of Lystra and Derbe in Lycaonia. The region of Lycaonia lay east of Iconium and was also in the Roman province of Galatia.⁶⁶⁰⁰ Lystra lay some twenty miles to the south of Iconium, and Derbe was another sixty miles or so southeast of Lystra. Verses 6–7 are best seen as an introductory paragraph for the Lycaonian ministry. The ministry in Lystra will be depicted in vv. 8–20a. The work in Derbe is summarized in vv. 20b–21a. There were no other significant towns in the region, but the reference to the “surrounding country” in v. 6 might indicate that they evangelized the smaller towns and countryside of Lycaonia as well.

5. Preaching to Pagans at Lystra (14:8–21a)

The major episode of chap. 14 takes place in Lystra. It began with Paul healing a cripple there (vv. 8–10). This precipitated a remarkable reaction from the native Lystrans, who attempted to honor the apostles as gods (vv. 11–13). The attempted homage of the populace prompted a strong protest from Paul and Barnabas, which was mainly expressed in a brief sermon (vv. 14–18). Ironically, the Lystran ministry was concluded when the same crowd who tried to worship Paul and Barnabas turned against Paul and attempted to stone him to death (vv. 19–20a). The section ends with a brief note of the work established in Derbe (vv. 20b–21a).

(1) A Lame Man Healed (14:8–10)

⁸In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. ⁹He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed ¹⁰and called out, “Stand up on your feet!” At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

14:8–10 The site of Lystra was identified only in 1885, lying near the modern village of Khatyn Serai. Located in the hill country and surrounded by mountains, it was a small country town in Paul’s day. Its main significance was as a Roman military post, and for that reason it had been given the status of a colony in 6 b.c. A Roman military road connected it with the other colony city in the region, Pisidian Antioch, 100 miles or so to the northwest. A statue has been found at Antioch which Lystra presented to that city in the second or third century and commemorating a concordat between the two cities.

⁵⁹⁵⁹ Ramsay (*Cities*, 371–73) interprets the “leaders” of v. 5 as the city magistrates.

⁶⁰⁶⁰ In A.D. 41 Lycaonia was divided into two areas, Lycaonia Galatica (within the Roman province of Galatia) and Lycaonia Antiochiana (to the east and under the Roman client-king Antiochus). See *Beginnings* 4:162 and Ramsay, *Traveller*, 110–13.

Perhaps this interaction between the two towns explains why Jews would have come so far in pursuit of Paul (v. 19).⁶⁶¹¹

The healing of the lame man in vv. 8–10 has many features in common with Peter’s healing of Aeneas (9:32–35) and particularly with his healing the lame man at the temple gate (3:2–10). Like the latter, this man had been lame from his birth. Also like the man at the Beautiful Gate, this man leaped up and walked about when healed.⁶⁶²² There are differences in the two narratives. In this instance the lame man showed a glimmer of faith (v. 9).⁶⁶³³ Perhaps it was in response to Paul’s speaking; he may well have been bearing testimony to the gospel. In any event, the healing is told with the utmost brevity. Paul directed him to stand, and the man immediately jumped to his feet and began to walk about. There is no mention of the name of Jesus or the power of God, but the reader of Acts has had sufficient examples by now to know that it is indeed through the divine power that the miracle was worked (cf. 3:16; 4:30; 9:34). The people at Lystra did not know that, and this ignorance led them to the wrong reaction.

(2) Paul and Barnabas Paid Homage (14:11–13)

¹¹When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” ¹²Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. ¹³The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

14:11–13 There was evidently no Jewish synagogue in Lystra. There was at least one family of Jewish extraction there, since Lystra was the home of Timothy and his Jewish mother (16:1). By and large, however, Lystra seems to have consisted primarily of Gentile pagans; and their reaction to the lame man’s healing reflects that background. “The gods have come down to us in human form!” they exclaimed (v. 11). At this point

⁶¹⁶¹ Ramsay, *Cities*, 407–18.

⁶²⁶² The Acts narratives contain a remarkable number of parallels between Peter and Paul. It may well be that Luke selected these particular incidents from the traditions available to him in order to highlight how God worked in the same manner through the apostle to the Gentiles as he had the apostle to the Jews.

⁶³⁶³ Faith is often connected to healings in the miracles of Jesus, usually noted by Jesus after the healing with the words “your faith has made you whole” (cf. Luke 7:50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). With the lame man at the temple gate, there is no mention of faith in the healing story, but Peter did seem to refer to it in his subsequent sermon (Acts 3:16).

Paul and Barnabas had no inkling of what was transpiring because the crowd's exclamation was in their own native Lycaonian dialect.⁶⁶⁴⁴ The people even delineated *which* gods had come to visit them. They probably started with Paul. Since he was doing most of the speaking, he must be Hermes, the Greek god of oratory and the inventor of speech. Barnabas was dubbed Zeus, the head of the Greek pantheon. Just why Barnabas received this honor Luke did not specify. Perhaps it was because of an ancient legend found in their region that Zeus and Hermes had once descended to earth in human guise.⁶⁶⁵⁵

Paul and Barnabas did begin to sense that something was afoot when the priest of Zeus arrived on the scene with bulls for sacrifice (v. 13). The temple evidently stood just outside the city gates, and it is unclear whether the intended sacrifice was to take place at the city gates or before the gates of the temple.⁶⁶⁶⁶ The latter would be the more

⁶⁴⁶⁴ Lycaonian was an isolated hill-country dialect, and there are few literary remains of it. Centuries of Hellenistic influence in their area would have given them knowledge of Greek, and they would have had no difficulty in understanding Paul's koine. As residents of a Roman colony, they may have had some familiarity with Latin as well. See H. J. Cadbury, *Book of Acts in History* (London: Black, 1955), 21–22.

⁶⁵⁶⁵ Seeking hospitality, these gods were rejected by everyone except for an impoverished elderly couple by the name of Philemon and Baucis. The couple not only took them in but forfeited their own meager repast in order to give it to the strangers. The gods rewarded the generous couple by transforming their cottage into a magnificent temple with a gilded roof. The inhospitable neighbors were punished by being inundated by a severe flood. The populace at Lystra may well have wanted to avoid the same mistake with regard to the miracle-working pair that now had come to visit them. The story is told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* viii, 626ff., where it is traced to Phrygia-Lycaonia. It is sometimes argued that the Lycaonians would not have had Greek gods, but there is ample evidence that by the first century the ancient gods had been thoroughly Hellenized. In the 1920s two inscriptions were found close to Lystra, both of which are dedicated to Zeus and Hermes, attesting to the presence of this particular pair in the mythology of the area. See "Acts 14, 12," *ExpTim* 37 (1925–26): 528.

⁶⁶⁶⁶ Likely the temple was designated "the Zeus before the city," with the prepositional phrase functioning almost adjectivally (equivalent to the adjective πρόπολις often found in inscriptions).

normal procedure. The sacrifice was to be anything but perfunctory, since the victims were garlanded with festive woolen wreaths.⁶⁷⁷ Only the best for visiting gods!

(3) Paul and Barnabas Dismayed (14:14–18)

¹⁴But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: ¹⁵“Men, 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, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. ¹⁶In the past, he let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” ¹⁸Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

14:14–18 By now the two apostles were fully aware of what was taking place. They rushed into the crowd, rending their garments. The tearing of one’s clothes is a gesture found elsewhere in the Bible. It could dramatize a state of mourning (cf. Gen 37:29, 34), express extreme distress (Josh 7:6), or protest a perceived blasphemy (Mark 14:63). Here the gesture expressed ardent protest and was designed to put a stop to the intended sacrifice. “We too are only men, human like you,” they shouted (v. 15). They were not about to be a party to such a blasphemous act. Herod Antipas had himself been given homage as a god, and he fared none too well for failing to deny it (12:22–23). It seems to be human nature to want gods that can be seen and touched, gods in the likeness of men. “Holy men” in every age succumb to the temptation to be venerated. Ministers should follow the example of the apostles and take warning from Herod.

Once they had gotten the crowd’s attention, they explained their protest in the form of a minis sermon (vv. 15–18). It is the first sermon in Acts to a purely pagan group, which believed in many gods and had no knowledge whatever of the God of the Jews and Christians. The apostles had to start at the very beginning, not with the coming of Christ but with the basic theological assumption of monotheism—that God is one (Deut 6:4). As such the sermon has its parallel in Paul’s address to the Areopagus (17:22–31), and in many ways the address to the Athenians is the best commentary on the sermon at

⁶⁷⁷ G. D. Kilpatrick argues for the text of Codex Bezae being the correct reading in v. 13. Instead of θύειν, it has ἐπιθύειν for “sacrifice,” a term used in the LXX and Josephus for an improper, *pagan* sacrifice (“*Epithuein* and *epikrinein* in the Greek Bible,” ZNW 74 [1983]: 151–53).

Lystra. The text reads almost as if the sermon was delivered by both apostles, but it is probably a fair assumption that Paul was the spokesman on this occasion as well (cf. 14:12).

Paul's introduction had to do with the vanity of their worship. Any religion is pretty empty that would venerate men as gods. The pagan polytheism was vanity, emptiness, worthlessness, idolatrous worship of gods who were nongods (cf. Jer 2:5; Rom 1:21–23). Paul exhorted them to abandon this vain worship and turn to the one true and *living* God, the source of all that truly lives. This was the main theme of the sermon—the *living God*.⁶⁶⁸⁸ *Three things are said about God.*

First, he is Creator of all life, all that dwells on earth and in the seas and in the skies. Paul was perhaps quoting from Ps 146:6, but it is in any event the threefold division of creation familiar from the Old Testament (cf. Exod 20:11; Acts 4:24; 17:24). Paul's second point deals with God's *forbearance* and mercy. In former generations God allowed the Gentiles to go their own way (v. 16). The implication is that then their deeds were done in ignorance and to that extent they were not held accountable for them (cf. 17:30a). But then implies now. Then they had had no revelation; now they did. Then they had not known the true God. Now Paul was revealing him to them. Then they had not been held accountable; now they were accountable (cf. 17:30b). Yet even in the past God had not left himself without a witness. He had revealed himself in his works of natural *providence*. This was Paul's final point (v. 17). God had been sending rain from heaven and causing the crops to flourish. Fruitful harvests had brought plenty of food to nourish the body and cheer the soul.⁶⁶⁹⁹ Such ideas of divine providence would not have been strange to the ears of the Lystrans. They were often expressed by pagan writers in speaking of the benevolence of the gods.⁷⁷⁰⁰ What was new to them was Paul's message of the *one* God—that all the benevolence of nature came from the one and only God who was himself the source of all creation.

⁶⁶⁸⁸ For a similar treatment of turning from idolatry to the living God, cf. 1 Thess 1:9. For God as the source of all true life, cf. 1 Cor 8:6.

⁶⁹⁶⁹ The Greek is somewhat obscure in v. 17, literally reading "filling your hearts with food and rejoicing." The NIV preserves the intended sense well. See O. Lagercrantz, "Act 14, 17," *ZNW* (1932): 86–87.

⁷⁰⁷⁰ See F. G. Downing, "Common Ground with Paganism in Luke and in Josephus," *NTS* 28 (1982): 546–52. For an argument that the basic source of this emphasis on providence is Jesus' teaching on the mercy of God, see E. Lerle, "Die Predigt in Lystra (Acta xiv, 15–18)," *NTS* 7 (1960–61): 46–55.

It has often been argued that Paul drew opposite conclusions from the argument from natural providence in the Lystran sermon as compared to Rom 1:18–25. That is true, but it is equally true that the two are in no way contradictory. The basic premise is identical in both: God has revealed himself in his works, in creation. The contexts and hence the application of the premise are radically different in the two instances. In the speech at Lystra as well as the speech on the Areopagus (cf. 17:24–28), Paul used the argument from creation to build bridges, to establish a point of identification with his pagan hearers. While they may never have heard of his God before, they had *seen* him—in his providential works of nature. In Rom 1:18–25 Paul was seeking to establish humanity’s responsibility before a just God. The Gentiles could not claim that they had no responsibility before God on the grounds that they had received no revelation. They had received revelation in God’s providential works of creation and had perverted that revelation by worshiping nature itself, exchanging the Creator for the creation. The Gentiles were thus without excuse (Rom 1:20). We simply do not know how Paul would have moved to establish the Lystrans’ need to repent had he moved on to discuss repentance and judgment. His sermon was not completed at Lystra. The Areopagus speech gives an idea of how he would have proceeded. There the call to repentance is very closely linked to the Gentile idolatry (Acts 17:29f.), which is precisely the argument of Rom 1:18–25.

Evidently Paul and Barnabas were cut short in their witness. It is anything but a complete exposition of the gospel. Paul never got beyond the basic monotheistic message of one God. There is no reference to Christ at all. Luke was well aware of its incompleteness. Verse 18 indicates that the sermon was cut off. The crowd was still intent on sacrificing to the apostles, so impressed had they been by the healing of the lame man. Even with his brief sermon on God, Paul could scarcely restrain them. The time in Lystra, however, was not over. There would be occasion in the future to introduce them to Christ. Just how he would have moved on to speak of Christ to a pagan Gentile group we will see in the Areopagus sermon of chap. 17.

(4) Paul and Barnabas Rejected (14:19–20a)

¹⁹Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. ²⁰But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city.

14:19–20a The apostles evidently worked for a while in Lystra as is indicated by the presence of disciples there (v. 20a).⁷⁷¹¹ One would have thought that Lystra would be particularly receptive, given its mainly Gentile population and the fact that they had even taken the apostles for gods. But crowds are fickle, especially when their expectations are not fulfilled. Perhaps their regard for the apostles soured when they discovered that they were not bringing them the material blessings of the gods. In any event, they were turned against Paul and Barnabas by a group of Paul’s former Jewish opponents who had come from Iconium and even the 100 miles from Pisidian Antioch. In an act of mob violence, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, taking him for dead. Just why Barnabas was spared is not indicated. He was evidently not present on the occasion when Paul was attacked. Some of the disciples from Lystra came out of town and encircled Paul’s body, perhaps indicating that they had some question about his death and desired to protect him from further harm. Suddenly Paul rose in their midst and was able to accompany them back into the city. The question has often been raised whether Paul actually was restored from death. Luke’s reference to their “thinking he was dead” (v. 19) would indicate that this was not the case. A miracle did occur, however. God’s deliverance of his own from a dire threat like this is a special testimony to his protective providence, and that is always a miracle. In his catalogue of his trials, Paul mentioned in 2 Cor 11:25 the one time when he had been stoned, probably referring to this incident at Lystra (cf. 2 Tim 3:11).

(5) *The Ministry at Derbe (14:20b–21a)*

The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

²¹They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples.

14:20b–21a Paul and Barnabas did not linger in Lystra. It was no longer safe to remain there. The very next morning they set out for Derbe (v. 20b). Since Derbe was some sixty miles southeast of Lystra, the journey would have taken several days on foot.⁷⁷²²

⁷¹⁷¹ The Western text adds the note in v. 19 that the apostles “spent some time [in Lystra] and taught,” thus making explicit what is implicit in the mention of the Lystran “disciples” in v. 20.

⁷²⁷² Recent epigraphic evidence indicates that Derbe was located further south and east of the site formerly maintained. The new site is at Kerti Huyok, thirteen miles northeast of modern Karaman. If this is correct, Derbe would have been located on the frontier as a Roman military post between the province of Galatia and the client-kingdom of Antiochus. See B. van Elderen, “Some Archaeological Observations,” *Apostolic History*

Luke related no specific anecdote about the ministry in Derbe but only gave the essential details that a successful witness was carried on there and many disciples were won to the Lord. Derbe was the easternmost church established on the mission of Paul and Barnabas. Had the two chosen to do so, they could have continued southeast from Derbe on through the Cilician gates the 150 miles or so to Paul's hometown of Tarsus and from there back to Syrian Antioch. It would have been the easiest route home by far. They chose, however, to retrace their footsteps and revisit all the congregations that had been established in the course of the mission. In so doing they gave an important lesson on the necessity of follow-up and nurture for any evangelistic effort. Paul would again visit these same congregations on his next mission (16:1–6).

6. The Missionaries' Return to Antioch (14:21b–28)

Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch,²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said.²³ Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.²⁴ After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia,²⁵ and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.

²⁶From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed.²⁷ On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.²⁸ And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

14:21b–23 The two apostles returned the way they had come, revisiting the newly established churches along the route—first Lystra, then Iconium, and finally Pisidian Antioch. In each congregation they performed three essential ministries. First, they strengthened the disciples (v. 22a). This probably refers to their further instructing the Christians in their new faith. Second, they encouraged them “to remain true to the faith” and pointed out the “many hardships” they might encounter for bearing the name of Jesus (v. 22b).⁷⁷³³ Paul and Barnabas had themselves experienced persecution on this

and the Gospel, 156–61; G. Ogg, “Derbe,” *NTS* 9 (1962–63): 367–70. Because this new site is as yet unexcavated, the location of Derbe remains somewhat uncertain.

⁷³⁷³ The occurrence of “we” in v. 22 belongs to the apostles’ address to the churches and is in no way evidence for a “we source” or Luke’s presence on this occasion. See H. J. Cadbury, “Lexical Notes on Luke-Acts,” *JBL* 48 (1929): 417.

trip in almost every city where they witnessed. They reminded the Christians that this was not just the lot of missionaries but could be expected of all who carry Christ's name. The theme is one Paul often sounded in his epistles—we must be willing to suffer with Christ if we expect to share in his glory (Rom 8:17; cf. 2 Thess 1:4; 2 Tim 2:12); the path to resurrection is by way of the cross.

The final ministry of the apostles was to establish leadership in the new congregations. For these early churches there was no professional clergy to assume their leadership. Consequently, the pattern of the Jewish synagogues seems to have been followed by appointing a group of lay elders to shepherd the flock. There is some question in this particular instance about who appointed the elders—the apostles or the congregation. The NIV text follows the most natural rendering of the Greek construction: Paul and Barnabas appointed the elders (v. 23).⁷⁷⁴⁴ This seems to be an exception to the more common practice of the congregation appointing its leadership (cf. Acts 6:1–6).⁷⁷⁵⁵ Perhaps in these early congregations the wisdom of the apostles was needed in establishing solid leadership over those so recently converted from paganism. Perhaps even in these instances the selections of the apostles were confirmed by vote of the congregations.

14:24–25 Verses 24–25 complete the mission of Paul and Barnabas, giving the final leg of the return trip. Again they traversed the rugged mountain paths of Pisidia into the lowlands of Pamphylia and arrived at Perga, where they had started (cf. 13:13–14a). No mention was made earlier of any witness in Perga, but now they devoted some time to preaching the gospel there. Then they descended to Attalia (modern Adalia), the main port town of that region.

14:26–28 The first missionary journey was completed with the return of the apostles to Syrian Antioch. Verse 26 forms an *inclusio*, or bracket, with 13:2f. It was the Antioch church that had commissioned the apostles, committing them to the Lord by prayer and fasting and identifying with their mission (“work”) by the laying on of hands. The work was now complete, and the two missionaries gave their report to the sponsoring

⁷⁴⁷⁴ The NIV footnotes indicate the alternative—that the congregation may have elected the elders, with Paul and Barnabas confirming this by laying their hands on them. The evidence for *this translation* is that the verb χειροτονέω often has the meaning *to elect by vote* as well as *to appoint*.

⁷⁵⁷⁵ In the letters of Ignatius around the turn of the first/second century and in *Didache* 15:1, it is clear that the congregations elected their leadership. See J. M. Ross, “The Appointment of Presbyters in Acts xiv.23,” *ExpTim* 63 (1951): 288–89.

congregation. Verse 27b marks a transition. The subject of opening “the door of faith to the Gentiles” would be the main topic of the Jerusalem Conference in the next chapter.⁷⁷⁶⁶ It summarizes the primary significance of the mission in chaps. 13–14. Evidently the report of this mission did not immediately reach Jerusalem, and Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch for “a long time” (v. 28). Word would eventually spread to Jerusalem and provoke the major debate that is the subject of chap. 15.

7. Debate in Jerusalem Over Acceptance of the Gentiles (15:1–35)

Acts 15:1–35 stands at the very center of the book. Not only is this true of its position halfway through the text, but it is also central in the development of the total plot of the book. The first half of Acts has focused on the Jewish Christian community, particularly on the influential Jerusalem church. The Christian witness had begun there (chaps. 1–5). Through the Hellenists especially it had spread to Samaria and all of the land of the Jews (chaps. 6–9). Through the witness of Peter to Cornelius, the outreach of the Antioch church, and especially through the first major mission completed by Paul and Barnabas, the gospel had broken through to the Gentiles (chaps. 10–14). All the preliminary steps had been taken for a major effort to reach the Gentile world. The precedents had been established; the first major successes among the Gentiles had been witnessed.⁷⁷⁷⁷ The stage was set for Paul’s mission to the heart of the Greco-Roman world as *the* missionary to the Gentiles.

There remained only one final hurdle, and that was the agreement of the whole church on the Gentile mission. There were still those among the Jewish Christians who had serious reservations about the way the outreach to Gentiles had been conducted. These reservations and the final solution to them worked out in a major conference in Jerusalem are the subject of 15:1–35. There the whole church agreed on the Gentile mission. The way was now open for the mission of Paul, and that will be the subject of the rest of Acts. Hereafter the Jerusalem church fades into the background. When it does reappear, as in chap. 21, it will be wholly in connection with Paul’s Gentile ministry. The focus is entirely on him.

The debate in Jerusalem revolved around the issue of *how* Gentiles were to be accepted into the Christian fellowship. The more conservative Jewish Christians felt that they should be received on the same basis that Jews had always accepted Gentiles into

⁷⁶⁶ The metaphor of an “open door” as an opportunity for witness is a favorite expression of Paul. Cf. 1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12; Col 4:3.

⁷⁷⁷ For the centrality of 15:1–35 in the total outline of Acts, see J. C. O’Neill, *The Theology of Acts in Its Historical Setting* (London: SPCK, 1970), 66.

the covenant community—through proselyte initiation. This involved circumcision of the males and all proselytes taking upon themselves the total provisions of the Mosaic law. For all intents and purposes, a Gentile proselyte to Judaism *became a Jew*, not only in religious conviction but in lifestyle as well. That was the question the conservative group of Jewish Christians raised: Should not Gentiles be required to become Jews in order to share in the Christian community? It was a natural question. The first Christians were all Jews. Jesus was a Jew and the Jewish Messiah. God had only one covenant people—the Jews. Christianity was a messianic movement within Judaism. Jews had always demanded of all Gentile converts the requirements of circumcision and rituals of the Torah. Why should that change?

Evidently the requirements *had* changed. There was no indication that Peter had laid such requirements on Cornelius, or the Antioch church on the Gentiles who became a part of their fellowship, or Paul and Barnabas on the Gentiles converted in their mission. This was a cause for serious concern from the more conservative elements. Not only was it a departure from normal proselyte procedure; it also raised serious problems of fellowship. How could law-abiding Jewish Christians who seriously observed all the ritual laws have interaction with Gentile Christians who did not observe those laws? The Jewish Christians would run the risk of defilement from the Gentiles. These were the two issues that were faced and resolved in Jerusalem: (1) whether Gentile converts should submit to Jewish proselyte requirements, especially to circumcision and (2) how fellowship could be maintained between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

In Gal 2 Paul told of a conference in Jerusalem that had many similarities to Acts 15:1–35. Although the two accounts contain significant differences, the similarities seem to outweigh these, and it is probable that they relate to the same event.⁷⁷⁸⁸ Both dealt

⁷⁸⁷⁸ One of the major reasons scholars are hesitant to equate Gal 2 and Acts 15 is that of fitting together the visits of Paul related in Galatians and Acts. This problem is given disproportionate significance, and many follow Ramsay's suggestion that Gal 2:1–10 refers to the visit of Acts 11:30–12:25. This is to ignore totally the question of content, the really important consideration. Acts 11:30–12:25 deals only with an offering for famine relief. Acts 15 deals with the requirement of circumcision for Gentile converts, as does Gal 2. The problem of the visits can be treated with less drastic surgery, such as assuming that Paul failed to mention the brief famine visit because he had no contact with any apostles on that occasion. This was the solution proposed by Zahn and followed in the commentaries of Rackham (239), Stagg (157), and Robertson (*WP* 3:221–22). See also the discussion in chap. IV, n. 136. For additional arguments for

with the issue of circumcision, Paul and Barnabas defended their views against the more conservative Jewish Christians in both accounts, and the final agreement was reached in both that the Gentiles would not be required to submit to Jewish proselyte circumcision. In Gal 2:1–10 Paul did not go into the question of table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians (though Gal 2:11–14 clearly concerns table fellowship between Gentile and Jewish Christians), but that issue was a natural outgrowth of the decision not to require Gentiles to live by the Torah. That it comprised part of the agenda at the Jerusalem Conference is highly plausible.⁷⁷⁹⁹ In any event, it will be assumed in the commentary that follows that Paul and Luke were referring to the same conference, and where appropriate Paul’s account will be cited to supplement that of Acts.

Acts 15:1–35 falls into four natural parts. The first comprises an *introduction* and relates how the debate arose in Antioch and led to the conference in Jerusalem to attempt some resolution (vv. 1–5). The second part focuses on the *debate* in Jerusalem (vv. 6–21) and primarily centers on the witness of Peter (vv. 6–11) and of James (vv. 12–21). The third part deals with the final *solution*, which takes the form of an official letter sent to Antioch (vv. 22–29). The narrative *concludes* where it began—in Antioch—with the delivering of the letter by two delegates of the Jerusalem church (vv. 30–35).

(1) The Criticism from the Circumcision Party (15:1–5)

¹Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” ²This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ³The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. ⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were

equating Gal 2:1–10 with Acts 15, see R. Stein, “The Relationship of Gal 2:1–10 and Acts 15:1–35: Two Neglected Arguments,” *JETS* (1974): 239–42.

⁷⁹⁹ A number of German scholars would divide Acts 15:1–35 into two separate occasions: (1) the original Jerusalem Conference when only the issue of requirements for Gentile converts was debated and (2) a letter from Jerusalem (“the decrees” of 15:22–29), which was sent later, after the dispute over table fellowship arose in Antioch (to which Paul referred in Gal 2:11–14). See Schneider, 2:189–91; A. Weiser, “Das ‘Apostelkonzil’ (Apg. 15:1–35),” *BZ* 28 (1984): 145–67.

welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

⁵Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.”

15:1–2 There were many Gentiles in the church at Antioch (cf. 11:20f.). There is no indication that they had been circumcised when they joined the Christian fellowship. This was disturbing to some Jewish Christians who came from Judea and insisted that circumcision in strict obedience to the Jewish law was necessary for salvation (v. 1).⁸⁰⁰ Evidently they shared the views and perhaps were even some of the same persons as the “circumcision party,” who are identified in the Western text as belonging to the sect of the Pharisees and who challenged Peter for having table fellowship with Cornelius (11:2). The group evidently represented the strict Jewish viewpoint that there was no salvation apart from belonging to the covenant community, the people of Israel. To be a part of that community a Gentile must take on the physical sign of the covenant, the mark of circumcision, and live by all the precepts of the law of Moses, ritual as well as moral. In the sharp debate that this demand provoked, Paul and Barnabas were the main opponents to this Judaizing perspective (v. 2). They had laid no such requirements on the Gentiles converted in their recent mission. It is altogether likely that the large number of such converts in their successful mission had attracted the attention of this Judaizing group in the first place.

The group soon realized that such a basic issue could not be settled in Antioch. It needed the attention of the whole church, since all Christians, Jew and Gentile, would be affected by its resolution. An “ecumenical conference” was arranged in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the “mother church.” The apostles were there. It was the suitable site to debate such an important issue. It is unclear who appointed Paul and Barnabas and “some other believers” to represent Antioch in Jerusalem. The Western text has the Judaizing group summoning Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem “to be judged.”⁸¹¹ More likely the Antioch church appointed them as its official delegates to the meeting. Paul mentioned that Titus accompanied him and Barnabas to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1), so he may well have been one of the “others” of Acts 15:2.

⁸⁰⁰ The Western text has the group make two demands: circumcision *and* conduct according to the law of Moses. This is perhaps a harmonization with v. 5.

⁸¹¹ I. M. Ellis, “Codex Bezae at Acts 15,” *IBS* 2 (1980): 134–40.

15:3–4 The distance between Antioch and Jerusalem was in excess of 250 miles, and the apostles may well have spent a month or so on their journey. They used the opportunity to visit congregations along the way. It could almost be described as a “campaign trip,” since most of these congregations would likely be sympathetic with their viewpoint that Gentiles should not be burdened with circumcision and the Torah.⁸²² This would be especially true of the Christians of Phoenicia whose congregations were likely established by the same Hellenists who reached out to the Gentiles in Antioch (11:19–20). The congregations along their route rejoiced at the news of Paul and Barnabas’s success among the Gentiles. Evidently they did not share the misgivings of the Judaizing Christians. When the Antioch delegation arrived in Jerusalem, they were well received by the “apostles and elders” (v. 4). These would be the central groups in the deliberation. Peter would be the spokesperson for the apostles, and James would represent the elders. Just as Paul and Barnabas had reported the success of their mission to the sponsoring church at Antioch (14:27) and to the congregations on their way (15:3), so now they shared with the leaders in Jerusalem what *God* had done through them. The emphasis on God’s blessing was essential. That God’s *leading* was so evident in accepting the Gentiles apart from the law would determine the final outcome of the conference.

15:5 The reception was somewhat cooler from a group of believers “who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (v. 5). It was perhaps some of their group who had first stirred up the controversy in Antioch. They at least shared the same viewpoint: Gentiles who become Christians must undergo Jewish proselyte procedure. They must be circumcised. They must live by the entire Jewish law. It was not the moral aspects of the law that presented the problem but its ritual provisions. The moral law, such as embodied in the Ten Commandments, was never in question. Paul, for instance, constantly reminded his churches of God’s moral standards in his letters. The ritual aspects of the law presented a problem. These were the provisions that marked Jews off from other people—circumcision, the food laws, scrupulous ritual purity. They were what made the Jews Jews and seemed strange and arbitrary to most Gentiles. To have required these of Gentiles would in essence have made them into Jews and cut them off from the rest of the Gentiles. It would have severely restricted, perhaps even killed, any effective Gentile mission. The stakes were high in the Jerusalem Conference.

It should come as no surprise that some of the Pharisees had become Christians. Pharisees believed in resurrection, life after death, and the coming Messiah. They shared the basic convictions of the Christians. Because of this they are sometimes in

⁸²² P. Gaechter, “Geschichtliches zum Apostelkonzil,” *ZTK* 85 (1963): 339–54.

Acts found defending the Christians against the Sadducees, who had much less in common with Christian views (cf. 5:17; 23:8f.). A major barrier between Christians and Pharisees was the extensive use of oral tradition by the Pharisees, which Jesus and Paul both rejected as human tradition. It is not surprising that some Pharisees came to embrace Christ as the Messiah in whom they had hoped. For all their emphasis on law, it is also not surprising that they would be reticent to receive anyone into the fellowship in a manner not in accordance with tradition. That tradition was well-established for proselytes—circumcision and the whole yoke of the law.

(2) The Debate in Jerusalem (15:6–21)

⁶The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? ¹¹No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

¹²The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³When they finished, James spoke up: “Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. ¹⁵The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶“ ‘After this I will return

and rebuild David’s fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild,

and I will restore it,

¹⁷that the remnant of men may seek the Lord,

and all the Gentiles who bear my name,

says the Lord, who does these things’

¹⁸that have been known for ages.

¹⁹“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰Instead 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. ²¹For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.

The central section of Acts 15:1–35 relates the debate in Jerusalem over the circumcision issue. There were two major witnesses, both in defense of the view that the Gentiles should not be burdened by circumcision and the law. Peter spoke first (vv. 7–11), followed by James (vv. 13–21). Both speeches are preceded by brief summary notices that set the larger context of the conference (vv. 6, 12).

Peter’s Witness (15:6–11)

15:6 Verse 6 relates the gathering for the conference. Since it mentions only the apostles and elders, many interpreters see this as a reference to the private conference Paul mentioned in Gal 2:2 with “those who seemed to be leaders.” These interpreters would see the full church being first gathered together for the “discussion” in v. 7 or even later—with the mention of the whole assembly in v. 12. If Luke mentioned Paul’s private conference at all, it would more likely be the initial meeting with the apostles and elders in v. 4. Verses 6–29 are a continuous narrative, and one would assume the whole group was gathered together for the discussion—the apostles and elders, other members of the Jerusalem church (including the Pharisaic Christians), Paul and Barnabas, and the other members of the Antioch delegation. The apostles and elders were singled out as the leaders of the assembly. They initiated the formal inquiry.⁸³⁸³

15:7–9 The meeting began with a lively discussion (v. 7). After the various viewpoints had been aired, Peter rose to speak. He began by reminding the assembly of his own experience in the household of Cornelius (v. 7b). Even though it was “some time ago,” possibly as much as ten years before, the experience had made an indelible impression on Peter. God had chosen him to witness to the Gentiles (cf. 10:5, 20, 32). Peter could expect the Jerusalem Christians, including the circumcisers, to remember this because he had given them a full report following the incident (cf. 11:1–18). What he had learned on that occasion was that God looks on the heart, not on external matters. God is no respecter of persons (10:34). Perhaps Peter had in mind the distinction made by the prophets that God does not look to the external circumcision of the flesh but the internal

⁸³⁸³ For the view that ἰδεῖν περί is a Latinism based on *videre de* and indicating a former investigation, see J. L. North, “Is *idein peri* (Acts 15, 6, cf. 18, 5) a Latinism?” *NTS* 29 (1983): 264–66.

circumcision of the heart (Jer 4:4; 9:26; cf. Rom 2:29). God had convicted Cornelius, looked to the inner circumcision of his heart, and accepted him on that basis. God had proved his acceptance of Cornelius and the Gentiles at his home by granting them the gift of his Spirit. God only grants his Spirit to those he has accepted (cf. 10:44, 47; 11:17). The fact that they had received the Spirit just as Peter and the Jewish Christians had was proof that God had accepted Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles on an equal footing (v. 9). He “purified their hearts” by faith. Peter undoubtedly was thinking of his vision: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (10:15). For the Jew circumcision was a mark of sanctity and purity, of belonging to God’s people and being acceptable to him. But in Cornelius God had shown Peter that true purity comes not by an external mark but by faith. In the account of Cornelius in chap. 10, his faith is never explicitly mentioned but is certainly evidenced in his following without question every direction God gave him. Here Peter made explicit what was implicit there: Cornelius had been accepted by God on the basis of his faith.

15:10–11 In v. 10 Peter gave his conclusion drawn from the experience with Cornelius. It was an emphatic no to the question of Gentile circumcision and the “yoke” of the law. God had accepted the Gentiles at Cornelius’s house without either of these. How could Jewish Christians demand anything more than the faith already shown? To demand more would be to put God to the test, to act against God’s declared will, to see if God really meant what he had already shown in accepting Gentiles apart from the law.⁸⁴⁸⁴ Peter’s statement in v. 10 is strong but should not be misconstrued. By speaking of the “yoke” of the law, he did not mean that the law was an intolerable burden that Jewish Christians should abandon. Peter was using a common Jewish metaphor for the law that had the same positive meaning Jesus had given it (Matt 11:29f.).⁸⁵⁸⁵ Peter did not urge *Jewish Christians* to abandon the law, nor did they cease to live by it. Peter’s meaning was that the law was something the Jews had not been able to fulfill. It had proven an inadequate basis of salvation for them. Neither they nor their fathers had been able to fully keep the law and so win acceptance with God (cf. Rom 2:17–24). For the Jewish Christians the law would remain a mark of God’s covenant with them, a

⁸⁴⁸⁴ For the concept of “tempting/testing” God, cf. Deut 6:16; Exod 17:2; Ps 78:18; Matt 4:7.

⁸⁵⁸⁵ For the law as a “yoke” see *m. Abot* 3:5. The rabbis saw the Torah not as an instrument of enslavement but as a yoke that bound them to God’s will. It was a gift of his mercy. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); J. Nolland, “A Fresh Look at Acts 15:10,” *NTS* 27 (1980): 105–15.

cherished heritage. It could not save them. Only one thing could—faith, believing in the saving grace of the Lord Jesus (v. 11).

Faith alone, grace alone—one could hardly sound more like Paul. Paul had said much the same thing at Pisidian Antioch (13:38f.). It is something of an irony that Paul had to remind Peter of this same truth just a short time later in Antioch when his actions went counter to his convictions (Gal 2:14–17). It is interesting to observe Peter’s progression throughout his speech. He began by pointing out how God had accepted the Gentiles “just like he accepted us” (v. 8). Now the shoe was on the other foot. The Gentiles had become the example for the Jews—“we are saved, just as they are” (v. 11). God’s acceptance of the Gentiles had drawn a basic lesson for the Jews as well. There is only *one* way of salvation—“through the grace of our Lord Jesus.” The emphasis on grace in 15:11 fits well with the emphasis on God’s sovereign activity in the salvation of the Gentiles. Peter’s ultimate point was that God is free to save whomever and however he pleases.

James’s Testimony (15:12–21)

15:12 At the end of Peter’s speech the entire assembly sat in silence. The hubbub with which the conference began (v. 7) now ceased. Paul and Barnabas had already shared their missionary experience with the leaders (v. 4).⁸⁸⁶⁶ Now they gave their testimony before the entire congregation (v. 12). Their emphasis was again on *God’s* initiative in the mission, his work through them, the signs and wonders that had attested to his presence and affirmation of their ministry.⁸⁸⁷⁷ This missionary report was the entire role that Paul and Barnabas had in the conference. The main arguments were offered by Peter and James, the leaders of the apostles and elders. Paul and Barnabas evidently offered no defense of their position on the Gentile question other than the implicit argument that God had endorsed it. This was wise procedure. Often those who are most involved in an issue cannot be heard objectively by their opponents. A third party can address the issue with less passion and more authority. This was the role filled by Peter and James, who were in essence the spokespersons for the two missionaries.

⁸⁸⁶⁶ Luke usually had “Paul and Barnabas,” but the order of names is reversed in v. 12. This may reflect Luke’s awareness that because of his long personal association with the Jerusalem church Barnabas held a certain priority there.

⁸⁷⁸⁷ The Western text offers a significant variant in v. 12, adding at the beginning, “And when the elders had agreed to the words spoken by Peter, the whole assembly became silent.” The silence is thus interpreted as the Judaizers having been silenced.

15:13 When Paul and Barnabas had completed their testimony, James rose to speak (v. 13). It was James the brother of Jesus. Paul also mentioned James's role at the Jerusalem Conference (Gal 2:9; cf. 1:19) and called him one of the "pillars" of the church, along with Peter and John. James had evidently become the leading elder of the Jerusalem congregation. His leadership of the church has already been indicated in 12:17. Upon Paul's final visit to Jerusalem he appears to have been the sole leader of the congregation, and the apostles no longer seem to have been present in the city (21:18–25). Here James continued the defense of Peter's position that the Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised or embrace the Jewish law. Peter's argument had been based primarily on his personal experience, which had shown that God had accepted the Gentiles by sending his Spirit on them solely on the basis of their faith. James furthered Peter's position by giving it scriptural grounding (vv. 14–18). Then, realizing that such a solution would create real problems for Jewish Christians in their fellowship with Gentile Christians, he offered a suggestion for alleviating that situation (vv. 19–21).⁸⁸⁸⁸

15:14–18 James began by referring to Peter's just-completed witness to God's acceptance of the Gentiles at Cornelius's home and described it as God's "taking from the Gentiles a people for himself" (v. 14).⁸⁸⁹⁹ James used the word *laos* to describe the Gentiles, a term usually applied to Israel. In Zech 2:11 (LXX 2:15), the Septuagint also applies the term *laos* to the Gentiles who will in the final days come to dwell in the renewed Zion and be a part of God's people.⁹⁰⁰⁰ Something like this seems to be the meaning here. In Christ God brings Jew and Gentile together into a single *laos*, a single people "for his name."⁹⁹¹¹

⁸⁸⁸⁸ In James's speech of Acts 15:13–21 there are a number of verbal coincidences with the Epistle of James, as has been noted by J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of James* (London: Macmillan, 1897), 3–4.

⁸⁹⁸⁹ James referred to Peter as "Simeon," an Aramaizing form used of Peter elsewhere in the NT only in 2 Pet 1:1. Some early church fathers, notably Chrysostom, confused the Simeon of Acts 15:14 with the Simeon of Luke 2:29–32. Others have identified him with Simeon the Black (Acts 13:1). Clearly James was referring to Peter's speech in v. 14. See E. R. Smother, "Chrysostom and Symeon (Acts xv, 14)," *HTR* (1953): 203–15.

⁹⁰⁹⁰ See J. Dupont, "*Laos ex ethnon*," *Etudes*, 361–65; Dupont, "Un Peuple d'entre les nations (Actes 15:14)," *NTS* 31 (1985): 321–35; N. A. Dahl, "A People for His Name (Acts xv. 14)," *NTS* 4 (1957–58): 319–27.

⁹¹⁹¹ Acts 15:14–18 is a key passage in traditional dispensational theories. The reference to "first" in v. 14 is taken to refer to the coming of the Gentiles; v. 16 is taken as the

James now showed how the coming of the Gentiles into the people of God was grounded in the Old Testament prophets. Basically he quoted from the Septuagint text of Amos 9:11–12, with possible allusions from Jer 12:15 and Isa 45:21.⁹⁹²² In the Hebrew text of Amos 9:11–12, the prophet spoke of the coming restoration of Israel, which God would bring about. The house of David would be rebuilt and the kingdom restored to its former glory. Edom and all the nations over which David ruled would once again be gathered into Israel. The Greek text differs significantly and speaks of the remnant of humankind and all the nations seeking the Lord.⁹⁹³³ In both traditions there is the concept of “the nations which are called by my name,” which links directly with “a people for his name” (“for himself,” NIV) in v. 14. This is the main concept James wished to develop. In the Gentiles, God was choosing a people for himself, a new *restored* people of God, Jew and Gentile in Christ, the true Israel. In the total message of Acts it is clear that the rebuilt house of David occurred in the Messiah. Christ was the scion of David who fulfilled the covenant of David and established a kingdom that would last forever (2 Sam 7:12f.; cf. Acts 13:32–34). From the beginning the Jewish Christians had realized that the promises to David were fulfilled in Christ. What they were now beginning to see, and what James saw foretold in Amos, was that these promises included the Gentiles.⁹⁹⁴⁴

subsequent restoration of Israel. See W. M. Aldrich, “The Interpretation of Acts 15:13–18,” *BibSac* 111 (1954): 317–23. The context of the Jerusalem Conference, however, does not call for prophecy. James was describing what was happening in his day, Jew and Gentile coming together into a single people of God. See W. C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of the Gentiles (Amos 9:9–15 and Acts 15:13–18): A Test Passage for Theological Systems,” *JETS* (1977): 97–111.

⁹²⁹² Jeremiah 12:15 seems to be behind the opening words, “After this I will return” (v. 16). Isaiah 45:21 may lie behind the phrase “known for ages” (v. 18), but the phrase may also have been drawn from the reference to the “ages” in Amos 9:11. See G. D. Kilpatrick, “Some quotations in Acts,” *Les Actes*, ed. J. Kramer, 84–85.

⁹³⁹³ The problem is, of course, that James’s argument is best carried by the Septuagint text. It is not impossible that James knew Greek and quoted the Septuagint text in a conference that had a number of Greek-speaking delegates. Even if Luke was responsible for providing the Septuagint text (for his Greek readers), the key phrase “nations [Gentiles] called by my name” occurs in *both* the Hebrew and Greek texts, and either would have suited James’s argument.

⁹⁴⁹⁴ See J. Dupont, “Apologetic Use of the Old Testament,” *Salvation of the Gentiles*, 139. See also M. A. Braun, “James’ Use of Amos at the Jerusalem Council: Steps

15:19–20 Having established from Scripture the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God, James drew his conclusion to the question of *requirements* for Gentile membership (v. 19). Gentiles should not be given undue difficulties; no unnecessary obstacles should be placed in their way. Though somewhat more restrained in expression, his conclusion was basically that of Peter (v. 10): Gentiles should not be burdened with the law and circumcision. The leading apostle and the leading elder were in agreement. The issue was all but settled. Resolving it, however, raised another problem. If Gentiles were not being required to observe the Jewish ritual laws, how would Jewish Christians who maintained strict Torah observance be able to fellowship with them without running the risk of being ritually defiled themselves? James saw the question coming and addressed it in his next remark (v. 20). Gentiles should be directed to abstain from four things: from food offered to idols, from sexual immorality (*porneia*), from the meat of strangled animals (*pnikton*), and from blood (*haima*).

When looked at closely, all four of these belong to the ritual sphere. Meat offered to idols was an abomination to Jews, who avoided any and everything associated with idolatry. “Strangled meat” referred to animals that had been slaughtered in a manner that left the blood in it. Blood was considered sacred to the Jews, and all meat was to be drained of blood before consuming it. The prohibition of “blood” came under the same requirement, referring to the consumption of the blood of animals in any form.⁹⁹⁵⁵ These three requirements were thus all ritual, dealing with matters of clean and unclean foods. The fourth category seems somewhat less ritual and more moral: sexual immorality (*porneia*). It is possible that this category was also originally intended in a mainly ritual sense, referring to those “defiling” sexual relationships the Old Testament condemns, such as incest, marriage outside the covenant community, marriage with a close relative, bestiality, homosexuality, and the like.⁹⁹⁶⁶ It is also possible that a broader meaning was intended including all illicit “natural” relationships as well, such as fornication, concubinage, and adultery. Gentile sexual mores were lax compared to Jewish standards, and it was one of the areas where Jews saw themselves most radically differentiated from Gentiles. The boundary between ritual and ethical law is not always distinct, and sexual morality is one of those areas where it is most blurred. For

Toward a Possible Solution of the Textual and Theological Problems,” *JETS* 20 (1977): 113–21.

⁹⁵⁹⁵ On “blood” as a sign of paganism, see I. Logan, “The Decree of Acts xv,” *ExpTim* 39 (1927–28): 428.

⁹⁶⁹⁶ That *πορνεία* should be seen in a wholly ritual sense is argued by M. Simon, “The Apostolic Decree and Its Setting in the Ancient Church,” *BJRL* 52 (1970): 437–60.

the Jew sexual misbehavior was both immoral *and* impure. A Jew would find it difficult indeed to consort with a Gentile who did not live by his own standards of sexual morality.⁹⁹⁷⁷

The four requirements suggested by James were thus all basically ritual requirements aimed at making fellowship possible between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Often referred to as “the apostolic decrees,” they belonged to a period in the life of the church when there was close contact between Jewish and Gentile Christians, when table fellowship especially was common between them. In a later day, by the end of the first century, Jewish Christianity became isolated into small sects and separated from Gentile Christianity. There no longer existed any real fellowship between them. The original function of the decrees no longer had any force, and they tended to be viewed in wholly moral terms. This tendency is very much reflected in the textual tradition of Acts 15:20, 29 and 21:25, particularly in the Western text, which omits “strangled meat,” adds the negative form of the golden rule, and reads “idolatry” rather than idol meat. There are thus four moral prohibitions: no idolatry, no sexual immorality, no murder (“blood” now viewed as the shedding—not consuming—of blood), and “do not do to another what you wouldn’t wish done to yourself.”⁹⁹⁸⁸

15:21 The question might be raised: Why were the original decrees ritual rather than moral in the first place? The answer quite simply is that the moral rules, such as the Ten Commandments, were already assumed. *All* Christians, Jew and Gentile, lived by them. The Gentiles needed no reminder of such basic marks of Christian behavior. Morality was not the issue at the Jerusalem Conference.⁹⁹⁹⁹ Fellowship was, and the decrees

⁹⁷⁹⁷ For the interesting suggestion that the decrees were designed to give social identity to Gentiles as being Christians alongside Jewish Christians, see C. Perrot, “Les Decisions de l’Assemblée de Jerusalem,” *RSR* 69 (1981): 195–208.

⁹⁸⁹⁸ For further treatment of the complex textual tradition of the “decrees,” see T. Boman, “Das textkritische Problem des sogenannten Aposteldekrets,” *NovT* 7 (1964): 26–36; G. Resch, *Das Aposteldecree nach seiner ausserkanonischen Textgestalt* (Leipzig: Hinrichs’sche, 1905); A. F. J. Klijn, “The Pseudo-Clementines and the Apostolic Decree,” *NovT* 10 (1968): 305–12.

⁹⁹⁹⁹ Some scholars would disagree strongly with this and maintain that the decrees were primarily ethical from the beginning; e.g., S. G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law* (Cambridge: University Press, 1983), 73–102. H. Sahlin argues that the Western reading is original and based on the three “cardinal sins” of the rabbis, “Die drei Kardinalsünden und das neue Testament,” *ST* 24 (1970): 93–112.

were a sort of minimum requirement placed on the Gentile Christians in deference to the scruples of their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ.¹⁰¹⁰⁰⁰ They were really not something radically new. The Old Testament lays down similar rules for the resident alien dwelling in Israel and for much the same purpose: to assure the purity of the Jewish community and to allow for social interaction between the Jews and the non-Jews in their midst. In fact, all four of the “apostolic decrees” are found in Lev 17 and 18 as requirements expected of resident aliens: abstinence from pagan sacrifices (17:8), blood (17:10–14), strangled meat (17:13), and illicit sexual relationships (18:6–23). Perhaps this is what James meant in his rather obscure concluding remark (v. 21): the law of Moses is read in every synagogue everywhere; so these requirements should come as no shock to the Gentiles. They are in the Old Testament and have been required of Gentiles associating with Jews from the earliest times. James’s remark could also be taken in another sense, which would fit the context well: there are Jews in every city who cherish the Torah. Gentile Christians should be sensitive to their scruples and not give them offense in these ritual matters, for they too may be reached with the gospel.¹⁰¹⁰¹¹

(3) The Decision in Jerusalem (15:22–29)

²²Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. ²³With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,

¹⁰⁰¹⁰⁰ The basis of the decrees in providing a means for fellowship of Jewish and Gentile Christians is also argued by M. A. Seifrid, “Jesus and the Law in Acts,” *JSNT* 30 (1987): 39–57. A. Weiser describes it as providing a “modus vivende” between the two: “Das ‘Apostelkonzil’ (Apg. 15:1–35),” *BZ* 28 (1984): 145–67.

¹⁰¹¹⁰¹ Verse 21 is difficult, and a wide variety of interpretations have been offered. In addition to the two given in the commentary, it has also been viewed as meaning that the Gentiles had already heard the law propounded and hadn’t responded; it would thus be futile to impose it on them: D. R. Schwartz, “The Futility of Preaching Moses (Acts 15, 21),” *Bib* 67 (1986): 276–81. J. Bowker sees v. 21 in the context of a formal *taqqaneh* or “alleviation of Torah.” Verse 21 serves to reassert the primacy of the Torah even though it has been relaxed with regard to Gentile proselyte procedure: “The Speeches in Acts: A Study in Proem and Yelammedenu Form,” *NTS* 14 (1967–68): 96–111.

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:

Greetings.

²⁴We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul—²⁶men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

15:22–23a James had provided a suitable solution that jeopardized neither the Gentile mission nor the fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. All parties seem to have been satisfied and to have agreed to James's suggestion (vv. 22–23a). They decided to draft a letter presenting the solution and to send two delegates from the Jerusalem church to Antioch along with Paul and Barnabas. The two delegates would be able to give their personal interpretation of the letter's contents and of the conference in Jerusalem. They are described as "leaders" in the church of Jerusalem, a term that is not further defined. In v. 32 they are called "prophets." Of Judas Barsabbas ("Sabbath-born") we know nothing more. He may have been related to the Joseph Barsabbas of 1:23, but even that is uncertain. Silas, who is a major New Testament character, is another story. He accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey and is mentioned often in that connection (nine times in the Greek text of 15:40–18:5; fourteen times in the NIV since it often supplies subjects). Silas is a shortened form of the Greek name Silvanus, and the Greek name has led some to suggest that he may have been a Hellenist. That would certainly be likely if he is the same Silvanus who served as Peter's amanuensis (1 Pet 5:12). He definitely seems to be the Silvanus whom Paul mentioned as a coworker in several of his epistles (2 Cor 1:19; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1). The churches of Corinth and Thessalonica were established on Paul's second missionary journey when Silas accompanied him. It was thus natural for him to include Silas/Silvanus when writing to them. Like Paul, Silvanus may have been a Roman citizen. Acts 16:37f. seems to indicate so. It is interesting to note that Paul's mission companions came from those who represented the Jerusalem church (cf. Barnabas, 11:22). This is another way in which the close bond between Paul's missionary activity and the Jerusalem church is exemplified. Not only did the Jerusalem

Christians approve Paul's law-free Gentile mission in principle at the conference, but they ultimately furnished his personnel as well.

Verses 23b–29 give the letter sent from the Jerusalem church to the Christians in Antioch. It was written in a very formal style, beginning with the salutation typical of Greco-Roman letters, listing first the senders, then the recipients. This was followed by the customary greeting (*chairein*). The only other places in the New Testament where this characteristic Greek greeting form was used are in Acts 23:26 and in the Epistle of James 1:1. The letter ends on an equally formal note with “farewell” (*errōsthe*), the Greek equivalent of the Latin *valet*.¹⁰¹⁰²² The formality is most pronounced in the long “periodic” sentence that runs from v. 24 through v. 26, one long complex sentence very tightly woven together. There is only one other periodic sentence in all of Luke-Acts, Luke's prologue to his Gospel (1:1–4). Since the overall style of the letter is so markedly Greco-Roman, one has the impression that the basically Jewish congregation of Jerusalem was making every effort to communicate clearly and in the style of their Greek-speaking brothers and sisters at Antioch.

15:23b–24 The letter was written in the name of the Jerusalem leaders, “the apostles and elders.” The recipients were denoted “the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia.” Actually, this could be considered almost as a single address. Syria-Cilicia was administratively a single Roman province, and Antioch was a city within it. It was at Antioch that the debate had arisen (15:1), and so it was to Antioch that the Jerusalem leaders sent their response. Verse 24 provides some additional clarification concerning the Judaizers of 15:1. They may have come from Jerusalem, but they were in no sense official representatives of the church. In fact, the language of the letter expresses some dismay with this group. They are described as “troubling” (literally “plundering” or “tearing down”) the minds of the people in Antioch. The word was a military metaphor (*anaskeuazō*), meaning originally *to plunder or loot a town*. The Jerusalem leadership was obviously not happy with the wholly unauthorized Judaizers and their so upsetting the Gentiles of Antioch.

15:25–26 Verses 25–26 basically recapitulate the content of v. 22 with the additional commendation of Barnabas and Paul as those who had “risked their lives” for the name of Jesus. The verb used here (*paradidōmi*) can mean either *to devote* or *to risk*, and the distinction between the two in this context would be slim. It was in their wholehearted devotion to Christ that the two missionaries had incurred so many dangers. The Jerusalem leaders referred to them as their “dear friends” (*agapētos*, “beloved”). One is

¹⁰²¹⁰² This form occurs nowhere else in the NT except in a variant reading in Lysias's letter (Acts 23:30).

reminded of Paul's account of the conference (Gal 2:9), where he spoke of the Jerusalem leaders' giving them the "right hand of fellowship."

15:27–28 Verse 27 continues to delineate the circumstances of the letter, noting the role of Judas and Silas. Only at v. 28 does the "meat" of the letter begin. The assembly had decided not to burden the Gentiles—no circumcision, no law, only these "necessary things" (author's translation). The idea was really that there was to be no burden on the Gentiles. Instead of a burden, the Gentiles were to be asked to follow the four proscribed areas of the "apostolic decree"—not as a law, but as a basis for fellowship. The addition of the Holy Spirit in v. 28 is significant. Just as the Spirit had been instrumental in the inclusion of the Gentiles (15:8, 12), so now in the conference the Spirit had led the Jerusalem leaders in considering the conditions for their inclusion.

15:29 Verse 29 lists the four provisions of the apostolic decree just as originally proposed by James (v. 20). There is one slight variation. Whereas James had spoken in terms of "food polluted by idols," the letter defined this with the more precise term "food sacrificed to idols" (*eidōlothyton*). The proscriptions will be referred to one more time in Acts (21:25) and there in the same four terms that appear in 15:29. Evidently these regulations continued to be taken seriously in large segments of the church. Two of them, food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality, appear in the letters to the churches in Revelation (Rev 2:14, 20). Tertullian attests to the churches of North Africa abstaining from blood and illicit marriages. In the fourth century the Syrian church forbade sexual immorality, the consumption of blood, and strangled meat.¹⁰¹⁰³³

It has often been argued that Paul either didn't know of the decrees or flatly rejected them, since he never referred to them in his letters. Some have observed further that in his own account of the Jerusalem Conference, Paul stated that "nothing" was added to his message (Gal 2:6). This does not necessarily conflict with the existence of the decrees. The conference did approve Paul's basic message of a law-free gospel for the Gentiles—no circumcision, no Torah, no "burden." The decrees were a strategy for Jewish-Gentile fellowship, and that was something different. The assumption that Paul showed no knowledge of the decrees in his letters is also questionable. In 1 Cor 5–10 Paul seems to have dealt with two of its provisions: sexual immorality in chaps. 5–7 and food sacrificed to idols in chaps. 8–10. The latter treatment is particularly instructive, where Paul advised the "strong" not to eat idol meat in the presence of the "weak." This reflects the basic "accommodation" principle of the decrees—to enable fellowship

¹⁰³¹⁰³ Simon, "Decrees," 455–59.

between Christians. True, Paul did not accept the decrees as “law”; he did seem to embrace their spirit.¹⁰¹⁰⁴⁴

(4) The Decision Reported to Antioch (15:30–35)

³⁰The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. ³¹The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. ³²Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. ³³After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. ³⁵But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

15:30–33 Paul and Barnabas and the other delegates returned to the church of Antioch along with the two representatives of the Jerusalem church, Judas and Silas. Upon their arrival, the church was assembled and the letter read in the presence of all. Everyone found its message “encouraging” (v. 31),¹⁰¹⁰⁵⁵ undoubtedly because it confirmed their practice of accepting the Gentiles without demanding circumcision and the obligations of the Torah. As prophets (v. 32) Judas and Silas were able to go beyond their role of interpreters of the Jerusalem Conference and to further strengthen and encourage their brothers and sisters at Antioch. In the New Testament prophecy is primarily the gift of inspiration whereby one delivers a word from God that addresses the present needs in the life of the church.¹⁰¹⁰⁶⁶ The two were well received in Antioch and remained there some time, ministering to the church through their gift of inspiration. When they departed, they were sent off with the ancient blessing of *shalom*, that the peace of God would abide with them.¹⁰¹⁰⁷⁷

¹⁰⁴¹⁰⁴ See M. D. Goulder, “Did Luke Know Any of the Pauline Letters?” *PIRS* 13 (1986): 97–112. Goulder argues that the form of the decrees may have been influenced by 1 Corinthians.

¹⁰⁵¹⁰⁵ The word is *παράκλησις*, which can mean *comfort* or *exhortation*. Either nuance fits this particular context. The letter both comforted them and encouraged them by the conciliatory spirit of its exhortations.

¹⁰⁶¹⁰⁶ Codex Bezae adds that they were prophets “full of the Spirit,” to emphasize what is already implicit in the term “prophecy” itself.

¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁷ “Go in peace.” Cf. Mark 5:34; Luke 7:50; 8:48; Acts 16:36; and Paul’s customary greeting of “grace and peace” (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; etc.).

[15:34] Verse 34 is one of the Western readings that found its way into the *Textus Receptus* and from thence into many of the sixteenth and seventeenth century translations. It is the consensus of textual criticism that it was not in the original text of Acts and is thus omitted in modern translations. It reads: “But Silas decided to remain with them. Only Judas departed.” Undoubtedly the scribe responsible for this addition wanted to solve the problem of Silas’s being present in Antioch again in v. 40. In so doing, a much more serious conflict was created with v. 33, which clearly states that they (plural) both returned to Jerusalem. There really is no problem with v. 40 anyway, because it takes place some time later (v. 36), allowing plenty of room for Silas to return to Antioch from Jerusalem.

15:35 Verse 35 concludes the narrative of the Jerusalem Conference in summary fashion. Now that the Gentile question had been settled, the church prospered under the teaching and preaching of Paul and Barnabas and “many others.” The “many others” are significant. This verse is the final glimpse into the life of the Antioch church. Paul and Barnabas would soon be leaving for mission fields elsewhere. The church was left in good hands. There were “many others” who were competent to carry on its witness.

Summary. The concord reached at the Jerusalem Conference was a most remarkable event and established a major precedent for dealing with controversy within the Christian fellowship. One should realize the sharp differences that existed between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. Jewish Christians were faithful to all the traditions of their heritage. They observed the provisions of the Torah, circumcised their male children, and kept all the Jewish holy days. They did not cease to be Jews when they became Christians. James was himself a perfect example. In their accounts of his later martyrdom, both Josephus and Eusebius noted the tremendous respect the nonbelieving Jews gave him because of his deep piety and scrupulous observance of the law.¹⁰⁸¹⁰⁸ Not requiring Gentiles to be circumcised upon entry into the covenant community was a radical departure from the Jewish tradition. That James and his fellow Jewish Christians were willing to bend on such a basic principle is testimony to two things about them. First, they were open to the leading of God. Throughout the account God’s leading is stressed—in his sending the Spirit on Cornelius (v. 8), in the “signs and wonders” that God worked through Paul and Barnabas (v. 12). It was this evidence of God’s acceptance of the Gentiles that determined the decision of the council to accept Gentiles with no further burden. And the Spirit of God was present with them in the

¹⁰⁸¹⁰⁸ Josephus, *Ant.* 20.200 and Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 2.23. For the tradition of James’s martyrdom, see commentary on Acts 21:18.

conference, leading them in their decision (v. 28). This is a consistent picture in Acts: wherever Christians are open to God's Spirit, there is unity.

Second, the Jewish Christian leadership showed a concern for the world mission of the church that overshadowed their own special interests. They took a step that was absolutely essential if the Gentile mission was to be a success. To have required circumcision and the Torah would have severely limited the appeal to Gentiles, perhaps even killed it. Yet the Jewish Christians only stood to lose by not requiring Jewish proselyte procedure of the Gentile converts. It was bound to create problems with nonbelieving Jews. That it indeed did so is indicated in a later passage in Acts (21:20–22). If the Jerusalem leadership had only been concerned about the effectiveness of their own witness among the Jews, they would never have taken such a step. That it did so is testimony of their concern for the total mission of the church. Their vision stretched beyond their own bailiwick—indeed, to the ends of the earth.

VI. Paul Witnesses to the Greek World (15:36–18:22)

Paul saw himself above all as Christ's apostle to the Gentiles (e.g., Rom 1:5; 15:18; Gal 2:8). This calling is very much confirmed by the account of his missionary activity in Acts. His witness to the Gentiles was first revealed at his conversion (9:15) and was exemplified by his joining Barnabas in the evangelization of the Gentiles in Antioch (11:26). On the first missionary journey this special calling was confirmed for him—in the conversion of the Roman proconsul on Cyprus (13:12), in the mass response of the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch (13:48), and in the formation of a group of disciples among the pagans at Lystra (14:20). At Jerusalem, Paul's witness to the Gentiles was confirmed by the apostles and elders of the mother church, and the way was cleared for his further ministry. Paul was now ready for a major outreach to the Gentiles, and this comprises the subject of chaps. 16–20.

He was first led to a major ministry in Macedonia and Achaia (15:36–18:22). After returning for a brief visit to Jerusalem and a "furlough" in Antioch (18:22f.), he set out again for the Greek cities of the Aegean, this time centering around the city of Ephesus (18:24–21:14). Luke's account is selective. His purpose was not to give a complete account of all Paul's missionary activities. One is well aware of this from Paul's epistles. Acts does not cover the establishment of churches at Colosse, Hierapolis, and Laodicea; nor does it go into the complex relationship between Paul and Corinth during the period of his Ephesian ministry. It is even virtually silent about the collection that took up so much of Paul's time before his final return to Jerusalem. Luke simply did not provide a full "history" of Paul's missionary activity. What he did do was to hit the high points, provide a basic framework for Paul's mission, and show how in Paul's ministry the commission to the "ends of the earth" was carried forward.

Acts 15:36–18:22 covers what has customarily been referred to as Paul’s second missionary journey. The term is particularly applicable for the first part of the narrative, where Paul was extensively involved in travel from Antioch to Troas (16:1–10). The pace slowed down thereafter with more extensive stays and the establishment of the churches in Philippi (16:11–40), Thessalonica (17:1–9), and Berea (17:10–15). After a seemingly brief visit to Athens with his notable address from the Areopagus (17:16–34), Paul concluded this period of work in Corinth, staying there at least eighteen months, perhaps half the time of the total mission (18:1–17). Most of his time was thus spent in a major urban center, which set the pattern followed in Ephesus on his third mission.

1. Parting Company with Barnabas (15:36–41)

³⁶Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” ³⁷Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

15:36–41 Paul’s second major mission began like the first in the city of Antioch. Paul and Barnabas had been preaching and teaching there after their return from the Jerusalem Conference (15:35). “Some time later” Paul suggested to Barnabas that they revisit “all the towns” where they had established churches on their first mission (15:36). The imprecise time expression is perhaps more significant as Luke’s way of marking a major new division in the narrative.¹⁰⁹¹ A new division indeed does begin at this point—Paul’s second major mission. Actually, Paul did not fulfill in person his desire to revisit “all” the churches of their first mission. He did not return to Cyprus. As things turned out, however, all the churches were revisited, with Barnabas going to Cyprus (v. 39).

The reason for their going their separate ways was not a happy one and involved a major disagreement between them (vv. 37–39). John Mark was the center of contention. He was Barnabas’s cousin, and Barnabas suggested that he accompany them as he had on their first mission (13:5). Paul did not think this a wise move since Mark had

¹⁰⁹¹ The expression *μετὰ* plus an expression of time in the accusative case was Luke’s usual manner of marking major divisions in the second half of Acts. Cf. 18:1; 21:15; 24:1; 25:1; 28:11, 17.

abandoned them on that occasion (13:13).¹¹⁰² It is possible that there was an additional source of tension between Paul and Barnabas. Galatians 2:11–13 speaks of an incident that took place in Antioch, evidently after the Jerusalem Conference, in which Peter and Barnabas gave in to pressure from “certain men” from James and withdrew from table fellowship with Gentiles. Paul sharply confronted Peter on that occasion for his “hypocrisy” and was none too happy with Barnabas for following Peter’s example. Even though Paul had now been sufficiently reconciled to Barnabas to request his companionship on the mission, there may have been lingering wounds and possibly still some differences over Paul’s “law-free” Gentile outreach. Mark may himself have represented a more conservative Jewish-Christian outlook. However that may be, Paul did eventually become reconciled to Mark and mentioned him as a coworker in several of his letters (cf. Col 4:10; Phlm 24; 2 Tim 4:11). Standing in the background was Barnabas, always the encourager, showing faith in Mark when others had lost theirs and eventually redeeming him—ironically, *for Paul*.

Barnabas and Mark departed for further work on Cyprus. Though disagreements are regrettable, at least in this instance there was a fortunate outcome. Now there were two missions instead of one. Paul needed a suitable replacement for a traveling companion and chose Silas (v. 40).¹¹¹³ For this journey Paul had pretty much made the decision on his own. Still, as for the first mission, he had the support of the Antioch church and was commended by the brothers and sisters there to the grace of the Lord for his new undertaking. Paul and Silas headed north from Antioch by foot and visited the churches of Syria and Cilicia along the way. Since the “apostolic decrees” were originally addressed to all the churches in Syria and Cilicia (15:23), one would assume that Paul

¹¹⁰² The Western text of v. 38 is somewhat harder on Mark, stating that he abandoned them and did not accompany them “in the work to which they had been sent,” thus having him abandon his commission. See E. Delebecque, “*Silas, Paul et Barnabé à Antioche selon le Texte ‘Occidental’ d’Actes 15, 34 et 38,*” *RHPR* 64 (1984): 47–52.

¹¹¹³ For Silas see the commentary on Acts 15:22. For the rather unique view that Silas did not accompany Paul from Antioch but only joined him later at Corinth, see S. Dockx, “*Silas a-t-il été le compagnon de voyage de Paul d’Antioche à Corinthe?*” *NRT* 104 (1982): 749–53.

and Silas shared these with them.¹¹²⁴ This is all the more likely since Silas was one of the two originally appointed by the Jerusalem church to deliver the decrees (15:22).¹¹³

¹¹²⁴ As so often with the Western text, nothing is left to conjecture. It adds to v. 41 “handing over the commands of [the apostles] and elders.” See Y. Tissot, “Les Prescriptions des Presbytres (Actes xv, 41, d),” *RB* 77 (1970): 321–46.

¹¹³ John B. Polhill, [Acts](#), vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 288–342.