

Chapter 29 – Paul’s Mission

Acts 13:1 – 16, 27-13a, 38-39, 42-52; 14:1-18 – The beginning of Paul’s mission

Although Paul refers to himself in his letters as the apostle to the Gentiles, Acts has made Peter the first missionary to Gentiles with the Cornelius story. In Acts 13, however, we see a local congregation commissioning their own “sent ones” in obedience to a command from the Holy Spirit.

The church at Antioch had a multi-cultural leadership team: Barnabas was from Cyprus, Simeon had black skin, Lucius was from North Africa, Manaen was an insider in the court of the Roman puppet ruler and Saul was a native of Tarsus but trained in Jerusalem.

How do you think “the Holy Spirit said” to the whole team at once that they were to send out Barnabas and Saul? Have you ever been part of a group that was in total agreement that God had given all of them the same message about a mission they were to do?

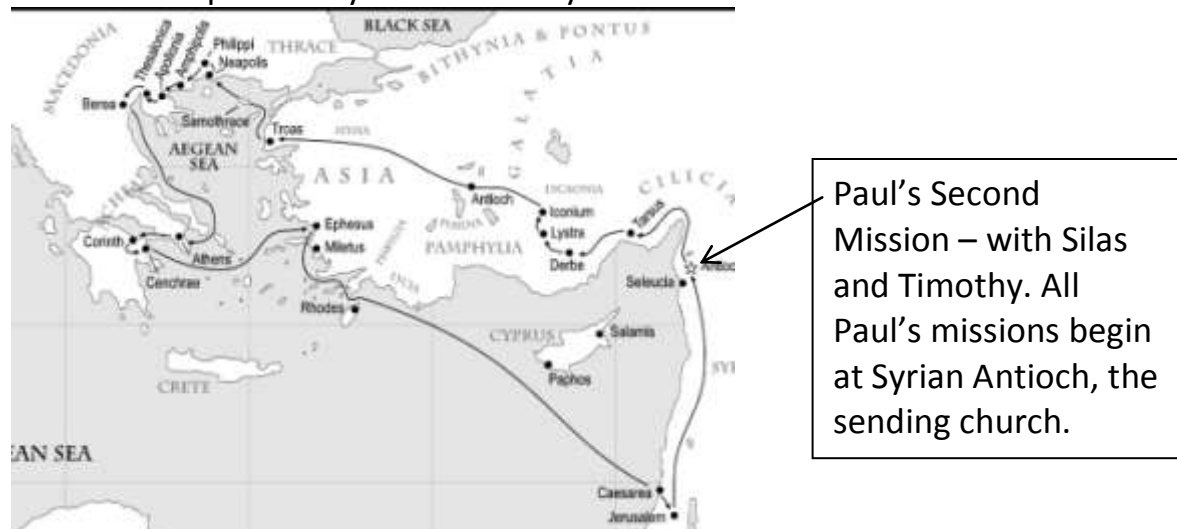


First Mission – Paul and Barnabas

Notice on page 338 that when Paul begins to speak in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, he addresses not only the Jews but also “you Gentiles who worship God.” Gentiles who attended synagogue on a regular basis and upheld the moral injunctions of Torah were called “God-fearers.” The Jewish community was admired for its moral fiber and charity. In Asia Minor (Turkey) and Greece there were many non-Jews who found God’s story compelling and who also tended to prefer monotheism to polytheism. They were not, however enthusiastic about circumcision.

Because there were both Jews and Gentiles in the synagogues it was logical for Paul to start there when he came to a new location. On page 339 Paul and Barnabas say that because the Jews had rejected the gospel, they were turning to the Gentiles. However, in the last paragraph of the Antioch episode, right before the italic summary, we learn that some of the people who persecuted Paul and Barnabas in Antioch were “God-fearing women of high standing.” Those God-fearers were most likely Gentiles. If you look at the bottom of the page you see them headed straight for the synagogue in Iconium. Although many Gentile men were especially happy to hear that the God of Israel was welcoming them in without surgery, some Gentiles and some Jews rejected the gospel message, while others believed.

In Lystra, Paul’s healing of a lame man (like Jesus and like Peter and John earlier in Acts) produced a very positive reaction. The gods Zeus and Hermes were believed to have come to earth and in one version of the myth they were treated with hospitality by only one poor couple. The offended gods destroyed everyone else who had treated them rudely. These folks in Lystra are not taking any chances. They bring out sacrifices and prepare to worship the apostles. Paul and Barnabas stop this only with difficulty.



Acts 16:1-17; 17:1-10, 18:1-11; pages 341 – 344 – Paul's Second Mission

Philippi – After picking up Timothy in Lystra, Paul continues northwest, ending up in Troas, near the ancient site of Troy.

The text is very clear that the Holy Spirit stopped Paul from going to the province of Asia (principal city was Ephesus) or from going up the coast of the Black Sea into Bithynia. Certainly there were people in all those places who had not heard the gospel. What are the implications for how our church plans mission strategy? Do we expect God to say “no” to good things we plan? If not, why not?

The expectation of finding a place of prayer at the river may have been that the Jews who prayed there would have performed washing rituals before praying. They do find a group of women and one of them, apparently a Gentile God-fearer, believes and is baptized, along with “her household.” Lydia is a businesswoman who has a house big enough for her own family and servants and for the visiting evangelists.

The incident of the exorcism of the fortune-teller is very significant. Paul has just entered Greece, of which the patron god is Apollo. Apollo is the god of prophecy and had a large temple at Delphi in Greece where people went to find whether or not they should start a business, found a colony, or enter on some other venture. Apollo's priestesses and their priest interpreters also judged disputes between city-states and explained the cause of plagues (as in the play by Sophocles, “Oedipus the King”). So this female slave is possessed by the spirit of Apollo, which is how she can tell fortunes. Like the demons in the gospels, she speaks the truth, but like Jesus, Paul does not want to be defined by an alien spirit. When Paul casts out the spirit, he is not only setting the woman free from spiritual bondage, he is also demonstrating that the power of Jesus is greater than the power of Apollo, even on Apollo's home turf. Like the owners of the pigs into which Jesus transferred a “legion” of demons, the owners of the slave are angry about the loss of revenue and apparently not awed by the power of Jesus. So Paul and Silas are beaten and imprisoned.

Now comes the scene in which Paul and Silas are singing in the chains and suddenly an earthquake frees all the prisoners. The jailer is impressed and converts with “all the others in his house.” In this culture, as in many places in the world today, everyone related to or a servant of the head of household was required to worship the same god(s) as the head.

In Thessalonica Paul follows the same strategy as before; he goes to the synagogue. He gets the same results: some Jews and Gentiles believe and some don't. Like his other evangelist ventures, this one ends with his being thrown out of town.

Escaping Thessalonica, Paul goes to Berea, gets the same results and gets run out of town AGAIN. He travels by boat to Athens, preaches there, and then heads for Corinth, a multi-cultural city on the little bridge of land between mainland Greece and the Peloponnesian peninsula. Here he meets up with Priscilla and Aquila, a couple who have a tent making business in Corinth. They take Paul into business with them and, when he leaves Corinth, they go with him—part of his mission team.

1 Thessalonians 1:1 – 2:9; 2:17-3:13; 4:16 – 18; 5:16-28 – pages 344 – top of 347.

1 Thessalonians is the first letter that Paul wrote to one of the church starts. Paul's letters are similarly structured:

Salutation – sender(s) to recipients, grace and peace

Thanksgiving – Paul reports his thanksgiving prayers for what God is doing in the church. In other letters he sometimes also says what he is asking God to do.

Body: Paul writes about what God has done through Christ for the salvation of humankind.

Parenesis: This is a Greek word that means "instruction." In this section Paul writes about the proper response by Christians to what God has done.

Travel plans: Sometimes Paul writes about his plans to visit the churches.

Closing: Consisting of various parts, not all of which may be found in any given letter:

Prayer for peace/grace: "May the peace of Christ be with you all."

Greetings to or from individuals

Reference to the "holy kiss" – Don't ask. I don't know. Nobody else does either.

Benediction/"Amen" – The letters were expected to be read in worship. Paul writes from Corinth to encourage the new believers. Near the end of the first full paragraph on page 345 there is a clear outline of the way that Paul preached to Gentiles: (1) Turn from idols to serve the true and living God; (2) Salvation and rescue through God's Son Jesus, whom God raised from the dead. The order is crucial. Had Paul merely stood up in a group of Gentiles and proclaimed "Jesus is Lord," they would have happily added Jesus to their collection of "lords" and

thrown a prayer or two his way from time to time to see what happened. Paul had to start with monotheism, then talk about Jesus.

On page 346 there is one paragraph taken from chapter 4 of 1 Thessalonians, verses 16-18. It is a promise about the return of Christ, written to reassure the Thessalonians because between the time that Paul left them and the time of the writing of the letter, some of the Thessalonian believers have died. This was a shock, because they were under the impression that Christ would return immediately before anyone had time to die. Paul promises that the dead in Christ won't miss out on anything; in fact, they "will rise first." After the general resurrection, "we who are still alive and are left" will meet the Lord to escort him to earth where he will reign. Notice two things: (1) Paul expects to be alive when Christ returns, (2) it's the living Christians who are "left"---not the unbelievers.

This is the proof text for what John Darby's followers called "the rapture." Darby was a 19th century English clergyman who invented the doctrine of "the rapture." Prior to Darby, no Christian in any previous century had thought of things the way he did. Darby (and the Schofield Bible) taught that before Christ returned to reign on earth, he would appear and gather all the believers to himself. Then later Christ would return for good.

This interpretation falters on the fact that the Greek word translated "meet" ("to meet the Lord in the air") is a word that always means "meet in order to escort the important person to wherever he/she is headed. Conquering generals were "met" by townspeople who escorted them into the city. At a wedding the bridegroom and his party were "met" by the bridesmaids and guests who then escorted him into the party (See Matthew 25:6). Crowds did not "meet" important personages in order to run with them away from the center of the action. They "met" them in order to escort them into the celebration of victory or marriage. Further, there is no indication anywhere else in the New Testament that Jesus will return halfway, leave again, and then return completely. When Christ returns to earth, he will come to establish his kingdom.

Finally, look at the short sentences at the bottom of 346. Paul calls the Christians in Thessalonica to "**give thanks in all circumstances,**" not to give thanks for all circumstances. This is not a call to deny suffering, but a call to recognize in the midst of suffering the one or two things for which one CAN give thanks.

Acts 18:12 – 19:1, 8-20; 19:23-20:1 – pages 348-350 – Mission in Ephesus

In Acts 18 we return to what was going on in Corinth, which was the same old story: Paul was in trouble with the law, violence broke out and not long after

that Paul left Corinth, taking Priscilla and her husband with him. Leaving the two of them in Ephesus, Paul went back to Jerusalem and then Antioch to report, then headed back to Ephesus.

Meanwhile, Priscilla and Aquila were confronted by a delicate issue. A really good Egyptian evangelist named Apollos came to Ephesus and was doing really well, except that his doctrine of baptism was way off.

How did Priscilla and Aquila handle this issue? What was the result? What can we learn from their approach when we face a similar problem?



Paul's Third Mission also began at Antioch. He seems this time to have gone straight to Ephesus without making many stops along the way.

Read the story of the Jewish exorcists on the bottom of 348- top of 349. What would you say is the message of this short vignette? The book-burning in Ephesus is about destroying collections of magical spells. It is related to the previous story because in the magical books that have survived in fragments, the names “Yahweh” and “Jesus” or variants of them are used in magic spells. This does not necessarily mean that some Christians were magicians, though it might. It at least shows that some magicians, like the Jewish exorcists in Ephesus, were trying to harness the power of Israel’s God. Not a wise move.

1 Corinthians 1:1-3, 10-13; 3:1-11, 21-23 – Page 350 – bottom of 351 – Plea for unity

“Cloe’s household” translates a phrase that says only “[people] of Cloe.” These may be members of a house church led by Cloe or, more probably, slaves or employees in her family business.

The problem is that various groups of Christians have become attached to different leaders: Apollos (the Egyptian preacher who was straightened out by Priscilla and her husband) Cephas (we assume, without any evidence, that this is Simon Peter), Paul, and Christ. They are all supposed to be following Christ, of course; maybe the “Christ” camp think they are spiritually superior because they are theologically correct. Paul makes two points on page 351: (1) Every leader has a roll to play but loyalty to leaders that causes divisions in the congregation is wrong. (2) Nobody matters except God and loyalty to God as revealed in Christ is the key to avoiding a drift away from the church’s mission.

1 Corinthians 5:9-13a – bottom of 351 – top of 352 – Clarification of previous letter

Paul wrote a letter to the house churches in Corinth before the letter we call 1 Corinthians, but it has been lost. He had urged the believers not to associate with people who misbehave sexually, are focused on making and keeping money, worship false gods, repeat negative talk about others, are alcoholics still in denial, or make money by cheating others. Apparently the Corinthian Christians had thought these categories were to be applied to their pagan neighbors. Paul now clarifies this misunderstanding. “Idiots! The world is full of people like that to whom you are supposed to be reaching out, not avoiding. I was talking about Christians who do that stuff. It’s your job to discipline them for their good and the good of the group. You can’t change the behavior of outsiders. Only God can do that.”

Chapter 5 of 1 Corinthians is filled with calls to discipline Christians whose behavior is not reflective of the values of Christ. Notice that the offenses are mostly making money at the expense of others and spreading criticism of other Christians. Sexual misbehavior is also mentioned. Have you ever been part of a church that had any sort of church discipline? How well did it work? Any ideas about what church discipline SHOULD look like?

1 Corinthians 6:16-20 - second full paragraph of page 352 – Against prostitution

This is part of a paragraph that Paul wrote to discourage the Corinthian men from using prostitutes. Advocates of legalized prostitution sometimes argue that it is a “victimless” crime. Paul insists that men who use prostitutes are sinning against their own bodies. There is some evidence that sexually transmitted diseases were a significant problem at Corinth; this may or may not be what Paul has in mind. His second argument against prostitution is that Christians are not the owners of their bodies---God is. Using language almost exactly the same as that used in inscriptions about slave emancipation, Paul insists that the Corinthians’ bodies were “bought with a price.” What does God do with the bodies God owns? They become temples of the indwelling Holy Spirit. It is interesting that Paul does not try to make an argument against prostitution in general; he merely asserts that **Christian** men have no rights to their own bodies because they are God’s.

1 Corinthians 10: 14-21 – middle of page 352 – Banquets in Pagan Temples

In temple worship, whether Jewish or pagan, most of the sacrifices offered on the altar were not completely burned up. Usually a token portion was burned. Depending on what kind of sacrifice it was, the rest of the meat either went to the priests as payment for their services (as in Leviticus and Deuteronomy) or was to be consumed on the temple premises by the family offering the sacrifice (also an Israelite custom). The temple of Asclepius at Corinth had a very large dining room where worshipers could have a party for family and friends to eat the sacrificial meat---perhaps on the occasion of a healing by the god. Paul’s argument is as follows: When we eat the bread and drink the wine of the Lord’s Supper, we are taking Christ into ourselves, becoming participants in his body. Those who do this cannot also eat the meat of a pagan sacrifice and take a false god/demon into their bodies. So whereas elsewhere Paul permits eating idol meat that has been sold by the priests in the marketplace, he forbids the Christians to attend banquets on the precincts of a pagan temple.

While this may seem irrelevant to US and European peoples, Christians in the two-thirds world have to deal with these questions all the time.

What do you think of Paul's interpretation of the Lord's Supper? It is a little stronger than the typical Baptist view isn't it? Paul is saying that eating the bread and drinking the cup actually cause something to happen---the believer is connected bodily with Christ. Or do you see it differently?

1 Corinthians 12:1, 4-6, 12-18, 27; 13:1-7 – bottom of 352 – middle of 353 –

Spiritual gifts

Apparently one of the divisive issues at Corinth was the ranking of spiritual gifts. The gifts themselves were not divisive, but it was a problem that the Christians were regarding some gifts more highly than others. Paul's argument is that all gifts are necessary for the wholeness of the church; no one can regard himself as more important than others; no one can regard herself as less important than others.

No matter what the gifts of an individual may be, they are worthless if not exercised in love. Love is not itself a gift; it is the manner in which all gifts are to be used. The kind of love Paul is talking about here is not the intense, exclusive love of marriage or deep friendship. It is the love with which every Christian is to treat every other Christian.

Look at the list of attributes of love in the paragraph that begins, "Love is patient, love is kind . . ." Doesn't this call for deeper commitment to each other than just the superficial niceness we exchange with most church members?

1 Corinthians 15:1-25, 51-58 – middle of 353 – bottom of 354 – The promise of resurrection for all Christians

The key to understanding this passage is that the phrase "resurrection of the dead" means "resurrection of those who are dead." The Corinthians do not doubt that Christ was raised; Paul says at the top of page 354, "this is what we preach, and this is what you believed." For modern people it is hard to believe that Jesus was raised from death. For the Corinthians, the difficulty was that they had equated their baptism with their resurrection. After all, hadn't Paul said something like, "Buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life"? Actually, by the time he wrote Romans, Paul was much more careful than that. He wasn't using the word "raised" for Christians in the past tense. He kept saying, "We **will be** resurrected"---future tense.

That was the issue. Paul was arguing that the future of the Christian dead is life in the kingdom of God, not a vague spiritual absorption into the divine life. For Paul, the resurrection of Christ is the proof of the resurrection of all Christians: Christ was raised, therefore we will all be raised. That is why he can say that for all of us death has lost its power. When Christ defeated death and the grave, his victory extended to all who are “in Christ.” All the parts of “the body of Christ” (the church) will be resurrected just as Jesus of Nazareth was.

I Corinthians 16:19-24 - top of page 355 – End of 1 Corinthians

This is the closing section of the letter. It includes greetings from “all the churches in Asia”¹ and specifically from Priscilla (Prisca) and Aquila, who were once associated with the letter’s recipients when the couple lived and worked in Corinth. The Corinthians are to “greet one another with a holy kiss,” as a sign of their unity. Paul verifies his authorship of the letter by his signature, although the rest of the letter was probably dictated to a secretary. Paul adds the exultant cry of the early church: “Maran atha!” “Lord, come!” and closes with a prayer for grace and a promise of his love.

Galatians 1:1-9, 3:1-4, 3:10-11, 23-28; 5:13, 19-25; 6:18 – bottom third of 355 – top of 357 – Freedom in Christ

Paul does not here condemn the Torah (first five books of the Old Testament.) He apparently thought that Torah observance was OK for Christians of Jewish background as long as they did not try to impose it on non-Jews. What Paul objected to strongly was the idea that Torah observance, or rule-keeping of any kind, was a way to earn God’s favor. On the contrary, baptism into Christ is the great equalizer; the privileges based on status, race, and gender are nullified, especially in the church. Notice on the bottom of page 356 through the top of page 357 that behaviors that are either self-destructive or destructive of human community are called “the acts of the sinful nature,” and positive behaviors are called “the fruit of the Spirit.” By using the analogy of grape-growing, Paul shows that he regards positive behaviors as an outward sign of the Holy Spirit within a Christian and negative behaviors as evidence of a life not yet transformed by the Spirit. So morals and ethics are the results of the **gift** of the Spirit, not merit badges earned to **achieve** the rank of “good Christian.”

¹ “Asia” here means the Roman province of Asia---a portion of what is now the coast of western Turkey. The mention of Prisca and Aquila suggests that this letter was written from Ephesus.

Romans 1:1-4, 7, 16-17; 3:19-28; 4:1-8; 5:1-11; 6:23; 8:1-4, 8:12-15; 28; 31-39; 12:1-8, 15:23b – 33 – pages 355 – 361 A letter to the Christians in Rome

In this letter, as in Galatians, Paul emphasizes that a restored relationship with God is a free gift, not an achievement. He takes advantage of the narrative of Genesis to argue that Abraham's trust in God is what mattered, not anything he did. He uses the analogy of working for wages by contrast with receiving a gift (358). Then on page 359 he repeats this theme:

The wages [paid by] Sin is death

The gift [given by] God is life eternal [present and future].

Notice that it is not God who punishes sin with death. Rather, deadness [during and after physical life] is the payoff for choosing other values over God. What God gives is not death, but life---life that begins with our "yes" to God and never ends, despite the end of our physical life.

Before your class meeting, read carefully through pages 355 – 361 and be prepared to discuss the parts you like least and the parts you find most helpful.

Reflections on Christian maturity

This is a LONG, but important chapter. It is the remarkable story of one man's transformed life. It may not be easy for us to identify with Jesus if we over-emphasize his divinity and forget about his humanity. But Paul was never anything but human from start to finish. There is nothing to prevent every Christian from becoming a Paul, except the level of our surrender to Christ. Remember that the only sin that Paul seems to have regretted was the sin of being religious instead of being Spirit-filled. Everything he did and wrote came out of his experience of the power of life in Christ. I ask myself on many days, "What is holding me back? What am I hanging on to that is more important than a BIG ADVENTURE like Paul's?"