

# ON THE ROAD AGAIN: ACTS 15.12-16.15



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*A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

On the Road Again: Acts 15.12-16.15  
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## Introduction to Acts 15.12-16.15

Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch, bearing the news of the council in Jerusalem. Their report is received with much rejoicing and further teaching and instruction in the Word of God.

After some time, Paul and Barnabas decide to return to the churches they had started on their first journey, to strengthen the disciples and continue the ongoing work of Christ. After a disagreement focusing on John Mark, they separate and head off in different directions, but apparently with the same end in mind.

Christians can disagree and still continue the work of Christ together. They simply need to identify their own callings and follow the Lord's leading. Barnabas and John Mark head off to Cyprus, but Luke joins Paul's team in Troas as they decide to follow a vision from the Lord to Greece.

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We hope you find this study of Acts instructive and helpful to equip you for your walk with and work for the Lord. Thank you for joining us.

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## 1 Case Closed

*Read and meditate on Acts 15.12-21.*

Peter's argument for not troubling the Gentile believers with Jewish customs had a powerful effect. When he was finished, no one said a word. At last it was time for Paul and Barnabas to weigh in, and their report strengthened the case made by Peter.

*For reflection*

1. To this point in the meeting of this first council of the Church, argument, debate, and reports provided the content. Should there be a place in churches in our day to discuss and debate different views of doctrine? Why or why not?
2. These debates were necessary, but the council needed to recommend some action to which all the churches of the Lord would comply. Mere theologizing is of little value. Sound doctrine is intended to lead to right action. Why?
3. James understood the need to reach a conclusion and prescribe some action, so he put forward a *motion* for the assembly's consideration. First, he summarized Peter's argument, to make sure everyone was in agreement. We can imagine the heads bobbing up and down as James spoke in verse 14. Then he reinforced Peter's argument, and the report of Paul and Barnabas, by grounding everything in the Old Testament, specifically, Amos 9.11, 12. Thus, on the basis of Scripture and church practice, he offered his motion in vv. 19, 20. What does James' approach to this matter suggest about the right way to do theology in the local church?
4. The restrictions spelled out in verse 20 focus on common religious and moral practices among the Gentiles of the Roman world. If the converted Gentiles were to show themselves to be a people holy to the Lord, they would need to be conspicuous about the change the Gospel makes, precisely at those points where everyone would be most likely to observe them. At the same time, such demonstrable changes of behavior would not go unnoticed by the Jews in the Roman world (v. 21), who would be in agreement with this new lifestyle and might be persuaded by such changes that the Gospel is indeed the power of God for salvation to *all* who believe (Rom. 1.16). Would you say that this action was *pragmatic* or *practical*? What's the difference?
5. A further word is in order about the role of James, the half-brother of Jesus, in this assembly. He is sometimes regarded as the *president* of the assembly and the one who has the last say about what the Church should believe and do. I think that goes too far. We can see that, as a member of the assembly his role was simply to wrap up the arguments, ground them all in Scripture, and put some action on the table for the assembly to consider. His role was crucial to the success of the assembly; however, his was not the voice of infallibility, but of consensus and action. Should local churches convene assemblies like this in their communities, to discuss doctrinal questions and recommend courses of common action? Why or why not?

*Summary*

Doing theology and living the Gospel are important parts of Kingdom life and the ongoing work of the Lord. Christians should neither despise theology nor disregard the demands of discipleship for

daily living. The two go hand in hand. What role should theology play in your walk with and work for the Lord?

*Closing Prayer*

Behold, how good and how pleasant *it is*  
For brethren to dwell together in unity!  
*It is* like the precious oil upon the head,  
Running down on the beard,  
The beard of Aaron,  
Running down on the edge of his garments.  
*It is* like the dew of Hermon,  
Descending upon the mountains of Zion;  
For there the LORD commanded the blessing—  
Life forevermore.

Psalm 133

## 2 A Directive for All Churches

*Read and meditate on Acts 15.22-29.*

The council put its decision into writing so that it could be communicated to the churches where the problem first arose, in Antioch. Theological debates play out in the lives of believers and churches, so we'd better work as hard as these first Christians to get our theology right.

*For reflection*

1. We note that the “apostles and the elders, with the whole church” agreed on this action – on the need to write a letter, on the content of the letter, and on the manner of the delivery of the letter. We may interpret the phrase “the whole church” in two ways. First, this council was itself a church, comprised of leaders from house churches, city churches, and regional churches (as the Church in Judea). Why does it make sense to describe this gathering in this way?
2. This phrase might also suggest that other believers, besides the apostles and elders, may have been observers of these proceedings, and were invited to voice their consent to the decision, although they remained on the sidelines throughout the debate. In acting as “the whole church” this council could not help but make sure its decisions were known to all the churches then in existence. Why? What counterpart, if any, of this do you see in our own day?
3. Two key leaders from the Jerusalem Church were sent along with Paul and Barnabas to serve as a kind of counterweight to those who had previously come from Jerusalem and caused the problem in the first place. Their voice, together with that of Paul and Barnabas and the letter from the council, would have reassured Jewish and Gentile believers alike. What practical applications can we derive from this council for dealing with problems or debates that might arise within the church?
4. We also notice, in the address of the letter, that the scope of its application reached beyond Antioch into Syria and Cilicia. Clearly the assembly intended its directive to apply to churches wherever Gentiles were being converted, because Cilicia covers the area of Paul's first missionary journey. We can see from this situation that, in the ongoing work of Christ, the Lord intends a kind of *connectionalism* for His churches. Individual churches are not separate from the whole Body of Christ, and the Church must maintain some structures or protocols that allow the Body as a whole to be governed by elders and pastors from all its various parts. Why don't we practice such *connectionalism* in our day? Should local churches seek this?
5. This letter was not intended as an exhaustive guide to Christian ethics. It had specific application to a specific concern. The Word of God is the final reference for all matters theological and moral. But the Church, from time to time, needs to speak explicitly on certain matters, whether doctrinal or practical. It is a failure of the Protestant Christian worldview and movement to minimize the *connectionalism* of all churches and to neglect means for actualizing the oneness of the Body of Christ, especially when churches are faced with crucial doctrinal and moral issues. Meditate on John 17.21. What counsel would Jesus give to fragmented evangelical churches?

*Summary*

We witness in the proceedings and actions of this council the powerful work of the Spirit of Christ

in bringing sound doctrine to light, increasing unity within the Church, and continuing the ongoing work of Christ in the Roman world. Only the Spirit could knit the hearts of these disparate people into one consensus of thought and action. How might the Spirit work to unite the local churches in your community?

*Closing Prayer*

For God *is* my King from of old,  
Working salvation in the midst of the earth.  
You divided the sea by Your strength;  
You broke the heads of the sea serpents in the waters.  
You broke the heads of Leviathan in pieces,  
*And* gave him *as* food to the people inhabiting the wilderness.  
You broke open the fountain and the flood;  
You dried up mighty rivers.  
The day *is* Yours, the night also *is* Yours;  
You have prepared the light and the sun.  
You have set all the borders of the earth;  
You have made summer and winter.  
Remember this, *that* the enemy has reproached, O LORD,  
And *that* a foolish people has blasphemed Your name.  
Oh, do not deliver the life of Your turtledove to the wild beast!  
Do not forget the life of Your poor forever.  
Have respect to the covenant;  
For the dark places of the earth are full of the haunts of cruelty.  
Oh, do not let the oppressed return ashamed!  
Let the poor and needy praise Your name.  
Arise, O God, plead Your own cause...

Psalm 74.12-22a

### 3 Back to Business as Usual

*Read and meditate on Acts 15.30-35.*

We note that the Gentile believers in Antioch did not feel “put upon” by the directive of the Jerusalem council. They rejoiced and were greatly encouraged to receive this word of clarification and instruction. I can’t help but wonder if the same result – a huge, corporate sigh of joy and relief – might settle on churches today if a council were convened to deal with some of the theological and moral issues currently vexing believers in many places.

*For reflection*

1. Following the delivery of the council’s decision, Judas and Silas were given the opportunity to speak, and not just once. They stayed around for some time, doubtless so that they could answer questions, observe the situation in Antioch, and help Paul and Barnabas deal with any issues that might arise from the implementation of the council’s directive. Do you think it’s a good idea, from time to time, for churches to hear teaching from preachers and teachers other than their own? Why or why not?
2. Their work completed, they were sent off in peace, and Paul and Barnabas were able to get back to business as usual, preaching and teaching the Word of God, together with many others who were teachers in the churches there. It seems that preaching and teaching are a continuous need in the churches. Why?
3. It was a bit of a struggle and something of an inconvenience, but at last the problem vexing the believers in Antioch was resolved, and a foundation laid for dealing with similar issues that might arise in the future. From what we’ve seen thus far in Acts 15, outline an approach for local churches to deal with issues that threaten to divide or derail them.
4. The peace of the Church has been restored, and the work of the Gospel is back on track. Paul reminds us that we have to “work hard” to maintain the Church’s unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4.3). Certainly the work of this first Church council was hard, but well worthwhile. (The best manuscripts of the Greek New Testament omit verse 34, and I’ll have a bit more to say about this verse on Friday). Compare what we saw in Acts 15 with what we read about in Acts 6.1-6. What similarities can you identify? What do these suggest about a Spirit-led approach to addressing problems in the church?
5. Meditate on John 17.21, Ephesians 4.3, and Psalm 133. How would you apply these passages to your own church? To the churches in your community?

*Summary*

The Word of God is central to building a church in unity and maturity. We saw this in the council that met at Jerusalem, and we see it in the churches in Antioch. How does such unity over the Word of God come about? How is it maintained?

*Closing Prayer*

Forever, O LORD,

Your word is settled in heaven.  
Your faithfulness *endures* to all generations;  
You established the earth, and it abides.  
They continue this day according to Your ordinances,  
For all *are* Your servants.  
Unless Your law *had been* my delight,  
I would then have perished in my affliction.  
I will never forget Your precepts,  
For by them You have given me life.  
I *am* Yours, save me;  
For I have sought Your precepts.  
The wicked wait for me to destroy me,  
*But* I will consider Your testimonies.  
I have seen the consummation of all perfection,  
*But* Your commandment *is* exceedingly broad.

Psalm 119.89-96

## 4 Agreeing to Disagree

*Read and meditate on Acts 15.36-41.*

Who was right in this sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas? Or is that even really the issue?

*For reflection*

1. John Mark obviously showed some potential for missionary work – perhaps even some skills as a writer? – and Barnabas was probably hoping to encourage his further growth and development by some on-the-job training. After all, the Church would need leaders in the next generation, and sound leadership doesn't just happen. Leaders have to be trained. What does your church do to train leaders for the future?

2. Paul, on the other hand, remembered Mark's failure during the first mission. He could not know what troubles they might encounter on this return journey, and he did not think it wise either to expose John Mark to such uncertainty or to risk being hindered by his failing again in some way. Was Paul acting in a reasonable manner? Was he condemning John Mark, or simply acting prudently? Explain.

3. So Paul and Barnabas argued with one another. Is that so bad? Not necessarily. Sometimes believers have to argue, even to disagree sharply, in order to discern the Lord's will in a situation. As it turns out, both men were right in this dispute, but for different reasons. Paul was right to expect more difficulty on this second journey. Can we imagine John Mark in the dungeon of that Philippian jail? But Barnabas was right, too. His investment in John Mark's development helped to prepare him as a useful servant (2 Tim. 4.11) in the Lord's work. How does it help, when disagreements arise, to realize that there may be two right answers in any situation?

4. Agreeing to disagree, Paul and Barnabas set off on their different, but complementary, missions. The Lord, Who does all things well as He prosecutes His ongoing work, oversaw the dispute, kept it from becoming a cause of perpetual division between the two friends, and used the sense of calling of each man to accomplish a greater work than they together might have been able to perform. That is why He is Lord, and we are not. How can keeping this in mind help to prevent disagreements from becoming sources of division?

5. The book of Acts is real history. It shows us real human beings doing a work of *total* reality – advancing the rule of Jesus Christ from heaven, on earth, through the Church. Gospel work is spiritual work, to be sure. But it is also human work, and that means it can be messy, confusing, inefficient, and even, at times, astonishingly beautiful. What would you suggest as some “ground rules” for people to keep in mind when they find themselves in disagreement over some matter?

*Summary*

People can't always agree on courses of action, but this doesn't mean they have to end up divided in their pursuit of the ongoing work of the Lord. We simply need a larger perspective – the sovereign rule of King Jesus – and the patience to see how He works all things together for our good. How do your church's leaders handle disagreements that arise between them? Ask one of two.

*Closing Prayer*

Examine me, O LORD, and prove me;  
Try my mind and my heart.  
For Your lovingkindness *is* before my eyes,  
And I have walked in Your truth.  
I have not sat with idolatrous mortals,  
Nor will I go in with hypocrites.  
I have hated the assembly of evildoers,  
And will not sit with the wicked.  
I will wash my hands in innocence;  
So I will go about Your altar, O LORD,  
That I may proclaim with the voice of thanksgiving,  
And tell of all Your wondrous works.

Psalm 26.2-7

## 5 Hold on a Second...

*Read and meditate on Acts 16.1-5.*

OK, so Paul heads out, letter from the Jerusalem council in hand, to inform the churches he founded on his first missionary journey, of the council's directive. So what's the first thing we find him doing? Circumcising some guy!

*For reflection*

1. Is Paul flouting the council? Has he thrown his lot in with the Judaizers? Not at all. Timothy is the "son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father *was* Greek." And everyone who knew him, knew it. Obviously, his father had not felt the compulsion to circumcise his son, but now this half-Jew would be ministering among Jews and Gentiles alike, and Paul was simply extrapolating the council's wisdom in order to make sure Timothy would not be a stumbling-block either to Gentiles or Jews. Meditate on 1 Corinthians 9.19-23. How can you see this principle at work here?
2. Together Paul and Timothy visited the churches founded on that first journey, distributing the directive of the council and strengthening the churches in the faith. What does a church look like that's being strengthened in the faith?
3. The result is that the work of the Gospel continued and many people came to the Lord through the strengthened witness of the churches. Is it natural to expect that strong churches should be used of God to lead many people to faith in Christ? Why or why not?
4. I'm thinking Paul must have fumed a bit as he set off from Antioch, a little put out with Barnabas. Before long, however, he must have realized the wisdom of his old mentor. Paul had Silas with him – who apparently stayed on in Antioch when Judas returned to Jerusalem (as reported by at least one ancient but not reliable manuscript, v. 34) – but he saw an opportunity with young Timothy. Silas was already a seasoned preacher and disciple-maker. He probably gained nothing from being with Paul. But Timothy would be to Paul what John Mark was to Barnabas, as we now see Paul taking on the work he'd learned from his mentor. He must have smiled to himself, thinking about Barnabas and Mark on Cyprus. How can you see Paul's teaching of 2 Timothy 2.2 at work in this situation?
5. Often, the best place to train new leaders is in the midst of the work of ministry. This is what Jesus did, and now we see this is what Paul and Barnabas did as well. How should such a template shape the work of leadership development in a local church?

*Summary*

The ongoing work of Christ continues as Paul and Barnabas separate to take up the work they'd begun in the cities of the Roman world. All churches need continual strengthening, and it is the responsibility of church leaders both to understand where their churches need to grow, and to lead them into growth. How do your church leaders assess your church to determine areas where growth is needed?

*Closing Prayer*

Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts;  
Look down from heaven and see,  
And visit this vine  
And the vineyard which Your right hand has planted,  
And the branch *that* You made strong for Yourself.  
*It is* burned with fire, *it is* cut down;  
They perish at the rebuke of Your countenance.  
Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand,  
Upon the son of man *whom* You made strong for Yourself.  
Then we will not turn back from You;  
Revive us, and we will call upon Your name.  
Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;  
Cause Your face to shine,  
And we shall be saved!

Psalm 80.14-19

## 6 The Leading of the Spirit

*Read and meditate on Acts 16.6-10.*

Satisfied that the churches established on his first journey were doing well, and that they had received and were following the directive of the Jerusalem council, Paul decided to press on to the west and north. He wanted to preach the Gospel beyond where he'd already been – his perpetual wont (2 Cor. 10.15, 16), but he encountered a bit of a struggle determining where he ought to go.

*For reflection*

1. The Spirit did not allow him to go where he wanted, whether to Asia (in the southeast) or Bithynia. We don't know exactly how the Spirit blocked Paul's plans. It could have been something as material as bad weather, a road out, reports of robbers on a particular highway, or lack of resources, translators, or something else. Or it could have been some direct word from the Lord. We don't know. What are some ways your church's leaders try to discern the Spirit's leading for your church?

2. What we do see, however, is Paul's intense sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit. Here's a man who, when he instructs us to walk in the Spirit, we know we ought to listen (Gal. 5.16-23). What does it mean – to use J. I. Packer's excellent phrase – to “keep in step with the Spirit”?

3. Paul received a vision from the Lord of a man urging him to come over to Macedonia, on the European continent, to help folks there. Five centuries later a similar vision would send an escaped British slave named Patrick back to Ireland to be used of God in launching the Celtic Revival (ca 430-800 AD). Do you think God still gives such visions in our day? Must they always be *visible* visions, or can they be of some other kind? Explain.

4. We note in verse 10 the addition of the pronoun, “we.” Luke has joined this group. Did he come from Macedonia to intercept Paul? Did Luke bring the vision of going to Macedonia? Or did he simply run into Paul along the way somewhere? We don't know. But now our writer begins recording events at first hand. Since Luke was a Greek, what benefit was in this act of bringing him into Paul's company at this time?

5. In 333 BC, Alexander the Great crossed the Bosphorus from Macedonia to Troy with 50,000 skilled soldiers and a vision of the world under Greek rule. Within 11 years he was dead and his empire divided and in decline. Paul and his small troop crossed the Bosphorus from Troy to Macedonia with a vision of the Kingdom of God and the resources of God's Word and Spirit. The rest is history. What vision guides your Christian life? What about the work of your pastor and church leaders?

*Summary*

The ongoing work of Christ now turns to the continent of Europe – from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, the witnesses of the Lord are truly reaching the uttermost parts of the earth. How should their example encourage and guide you and your church, as you claim Acts 1.8 for yourself?

*Closing Prayer*

God be merciful to us and bless us,  
*And* cause His face to shine upon us, *Selah*  
That Your way may be known on earth,  
Your salvation among all nations.  
Let the peoples praise You, O God;  
Let all the peoples praise You.  
Oh, let the nations be glad and sing for joy!  
For You shall judge the people righteously,  
And govern the nations on earth. *Selah*  
Let the peoples praise You, O God;  
Let all the peoples praise You.  
*Then* the earth shall yield her increase;  
God, our own God, shall bless us.  
God shall bless us,  
And all the ends of the earth shall fear Him.

Psalm 67

## 7 Same Song, Next Verse

*Read and meditate on Acts 16.11-15.*

Doubtless Paul and his companions spent some days getting to know the city of Philippi. No synagogue there, or we would have found our heroes in place on the Sabbath, doing what they'd done elsewhere. So they learned or discerned from their inquiries that folks convened at a place where prayer was customarily made just outside the city walls by a river. And on the Sabbath, they showed up to participate.

*For reflection*

1. Paul and his team determined to bring the Gospel, first of all, to the people they considered most likely to be open to hearing it – those who already believe in and practice prayer. Is there a principle here for working your Personal Mission Field? Or for your church in its mission to the local community?
2. Same song, next verse: The ongoing work of Christ goes on, just as He'd promised. Lydia is described as a woman who worshiped God. This suggests she had some contact with Jews. As a business woman her contacts doubtless ranged beyond her own city of Thyatira (on the Asian mainland, where synagogues were plentiful, as we have seen), and she may have made it her practice to join Jews at worship in various places. Was she the founder of this Sabbath-day prayer meeting? Could be. She certainly seems to be the one most open to the Gospel, and when she heard it, she believed and was baptized, together with her entire household (though from Thyatira, she appears to have moved to Philippi). Paul was baptized shortly after he believed, and so he baptized Lydia. What is the role of baptism in the life of faith?
3. Did Lydia's household include small children? It's possible, but we don't know for sure. She immediately showed the effects of the Gospel on her life by opening her home to Paul and his companions and insisting they make their abode with her while they remained in Philippi. So the first evidence here of the work of the Spirit is not speaking in tongues, as in previous situations, but hospitality – love for the brethren. True faith produces spiritual evidence (Heb. 11.1). What kind of evidence?
4. The ongoing work of Christ took root on the European continent in Philippi, and among people who appear to have been of Greek origin. Philippi was a colony and a prominent city, so there would have been many links between this city and Rome – links that doubtless would serve Paul well when he found himself under house arrest in Rome, and in need of friends who had friends in high places and knew their way around the capital city (cf. Philippians). The sovereign Lord is clearly at work here. Paul could not see where all this was leading, but he was faithful in whatever next steps the Lord showed him. How does Paul's example counsel you in working your Personal Mission Field for the ongoing work of Christ?
5. Are there any places in your community – apart from the churches – where people gather to talk about things like religion, philosophy, culture, or current events? Should witnesses from your church have a presence there? Would it be possible to create such a place, like Lydia seems to have done in Philippi?

*Summary*

The ongoing work of Christ proceeds in small increments, typically, one person at a time. Faithful witnesses, like Paul, look for opportunities to engage others in conversation about spiritual matters, whether to strengthen them in their faith or to explore the possibilities for sharing the Gospel. Is this true of you?

*Closing Prayer*

Come and see the works of God;  
*He is awesome in His* doing toward the sons of men.  
He turned the sea into dry *land*;  
They went through the river on foot.  
There we will rejoice in Him.  
He rules by His power forever;  
His eyes observe the nations;  
Do not let the rebellious exalt themselves. *Selah*  
Oh, bless our God, you peoples!  
And make the voice of His praise to be heard,  
Who keeps our soul among the living,  
And does not allow our feet to be moved.

Psalm 66.5-9

*For reflection or discussion*

1. What is involved in strengthening the faith of a local church? Why is it important that church leaders do so?
2. How can Christians learn to disagree and still advance the ongoing work of Christ?
3. How can we discern the leading of God's Spirit as we are seeking His Kingdom and righteousness?
4. What next steps for working your Personal Mission Field can you derive from our study of this section of Acts?
5. What's the most important insight or lesson you've learned from Acts 15.12-16.15?

*Glory to Glory*

We are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ *from* the glory we encounter in God's Word to the way we *live for His glory* in the world (2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Cor. 10.31).

What have you encountered *of* God's glory in our reading and meditations in this week's studies? How has He shown Himself to you more clearly? How can this help you live more consistently *for* His glory in the daily details of your life?

What have you learned about yourself from Acts 15.12-16.15 to help you in knowing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom?

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

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