

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS
- PART SIXTEEN - CHAPTERS 15 AND 16

There had been differences in the church before because of personalities and prejudices. (6:1; 11:2) Acts 15 records the first difference of doctrine. On one side were those who taught that salvation depended not only on believing in Jesus Christ but in keeping at least a key part of the Old Testament law. On the other side were those like Paul and Barnabas who taught that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone. (Eph.2:8) The first group are represented today by any who teach that it is necessary not only to trust Christ but to go through some church ceremony, join a particular group or behave in a certain way to be saved. Paul and Barnabas recognised, as we need to today, just how vital it was to get the issue sorted out if the church was to remain healthy and grow.

'Dissension' means 'standing up', and 'debate' means 'seeking together'. Paul and Barnabas, and later the apostles in Jerusalem, did not consider such things were unspiritual as some do these days. They went to great lengths to stand up for what they believed to be true, and to seek further truth together with those who taught differently. When the matter was still unresolved they went to Jerusalem to ask help from maturer Christians with whom they could again 'seek together'. They believed that energetic but loving Biblical debate brought unity, not division. (15:1-7)

Peter had worked the question of faith plus works, or faith alone, through before. His answer reflected what he had learned. (11:1-18) He had learned how to answer those who thought the gospel was only for Jews. In Gal.2:11-21 he had fallen into the very mistake others were now making, and Paul had had to remind him of the impossibility for Jews or Gentiles of living up to the law. (15:7-11)

Paul and Barnabas testified of how truth had worked in life - the only proper use of experience in our Christian witness. (15:12)

James, the Lord's brother, who by now was a leading figure in the Jerusalem church, (12:17; 21:18) drew the discussion to a conclusion based not on any special authority he had, but on the scriptures. When he quoted Amos 9 he was pointing out how even in the Old Testament it was promised that Christ, the son of David, would come, fall in death and rise again to make a place in Himself for the whole of mankind. Accepting a place in Him by faith is the only way to be saved. (15:12-18)

The difference in doctrine was settled by giving everyone respect and adequate time to express their views and then turning together to the Bible for God's answer. The recommendations to the church contained in the letter were pastoral not doctrinal. Idolatry and fornication dominated the society they lived in and threatened their relationships with God and their spouses. 'Things strangled' and blood were prohibited as part of the food laws of the Old Testament, and were declared clean by Jesus. (Mark 7:19) Jewish Christians would find it hard to change the habits of early life, and would easily be offended by those who pushed such changes. For Gentile Christians to respect their feelings by avoiding these things would be a loving way of strengthening the relationship between them and the Jews. James was expressing the same principle Paul does in I Cor.8, that love is above liberty. (15:19-21)

Their method of communicating the discoveries they had made was instructive. They wrote, and that letter is part of the word of God. They took a strong team of prophets, good communicators, and a teacher who encouraged the Christians to listen to God in His word and in their hearts. They did not rush the process but gave plenty of time for teaching, discussion and prayer. (15:22-35)

The last few verses of chapter 15 are most instructive. Paul and Barnabas went to enormous lengths to settle differences over doctrine that threatened to split the church but they could still get into an unpleasant fight between the two of them that for the moment split their partnership. They were both right and both wrong. Paul was right in believing that he should revisit the churches of Galatia. Barnabas was right in believing that God does not give up on people, like his young cousin, John Mark, who may have acted in his own strength and panicked when things got tough, but who later discovered the secret of effective service. (Col.4:10; Philemon 24; II Tim.4:11; I Pet.5:13) Paul would one day acknowledge how wrong he had been about Mark. They were both wrong in assuming that God's instructions to them individually were also His instructions to the other one. They were especially wrong when they tried to force their part of God's plan on the other one. We frequently make the same kind of mistake.

The resulting conflict of wills and personalities divides a church as readily as differences of doctrine.

God brought blessing out of their mistakes. Each took a new partner and two missionary teams left Antioch instead of one. By dividing the territory between them they were able to give more time to the churches for which they were responsible.

In chapter 16 a whole new continent opened up to the gospel.

16:1-3 Q.1 What do we know about the conversion of Timothy and his family?(II Tim.1:5,6) What indication was there that he was ready for missionary service? Why did Paul circumcise Timothy? Wasn't this compromising the principle he had fought so hard for in chapter 15? (Lk.3:8; Gen.17:10-14)

16:4-13 Q.2 What according to verses 4 and 5 was the secret of church growth? How can we apply the same secret today? What means did God use in this section to guide Paul? How does II Cor.2:12,13 explain what is meant in this passage about God opening a door for us? What is the significance of the change from 'they' to 'we' in verses 10-17?

16:10-15 Q.3 As in Lystra, so it seems in Philippi, there was no synagogue, only a women's prayer group. What was Paul's strategy for establishing a foothold for the gospel in this city? How did the Lord open Lydia's heart and with what result?

16:16-18 Q.4 Why would an evil spirit promote Paul and Silas' ministry? What would be modern examples of the same practices in which she was involved? Why was Paul annoyed by her behaviour? What is wrong with divination, trying to discover the future?(Lev.19:31; Deut.18:9-15) Why is God so against it? What effect does it have on those who practise it, or listen to others doing so? What is the Christian alternative? (Gen.3:5,6; II Cor.5:7)

16:16-18 Q.5 Comparing this story with Acts 13:6-12 what do they both tell us about our authority over the Devil in Christian ministry? Did the slave girl become a Christian? Should we be looking for demon-possessed people to deliver them?

16:19-24 Q.6 What does this story tell us about the real reasons why Christian workers are persecuted and the excuses that are used in doing so? What should be our attitude to hypocrisy and false accusations? (I Pet.4:12-19)

16:25,26 Q.7 Why were Paul and Silas praising God? Did they know an earthquake was coming? Does God always promise to send earthquakes for Christians under persecution? In what sense does God 'unfasten our chains' today when we praise Him in tough times?

16:24-34 Q.8 What means did God use to bring the jailer from suicide to salvation? Why didn't Paul and Silas make a run for it when God had obviously set them free? What lesson can we learn from their refusal to escape when God had given them opportunity?

16:28-34 Q.9 What were the steps Paul followed to lead the jailer to Christ? What evidence was there that he had been truly converted? How was it that his whole family came to Christ? How can we expect to see the same thing happen with families today?

16:35-40 Q.10 Why did Paul refuse to leave jail unless the chief magistrates came to see him in person? Was he simply standing up for his rights?(I Cor.9:12) What would have been the effect of his action on the way other Christians would be treated in Philippi in future?