

Bible Study # 41
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The Gospels and Acts Series—Acts 10—17

This evening we are continuing our survey in the book of Acts. We **are up to the middle section in the book of Acts—chapters 10-17**. One of the things that we will note, particularly this evening, is the issue of Gentiles. *One of the great issues of the early New Testament Church involved the acceptance of the Gentiles into the full fellowship of the Church.* Now let me preface that by saying that the issue was not simply a matter of accepting Gentiles. *It was a matter of accepting uncircumcised Gentiles.* That was the issue. The great issue had to do with circumcision.

It wasn't simply a matter of ethnic origin. If you want to note the contrast in Acts 8, we have the account of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. There wasn't any controversy concerning that. In Acts 10, when we come up with Cornelius (who was Italian by ethnic background), all of a sudden we have a major controversy that, to an extent, occupies the next five chapters. It really isn't settled until after Acts 15; even after Acts 15, it resurfaces from time to time. There was a reason for that. I think I mentioned this last time.

The Ethiopians, particularly the leading upper class in Ethiopia, the educated class, had from the time going back to King Solomon (almost a thousand years earlier) practiced the religion of the Old Testament. Many of them were circumcised. There were many Sabbath keepers among the ruling class in Ethiopia. It was the only example of a Gentile nation, over any period of time, where a significant portion of the population took it upon themselves to follow many of the principles of the Old Testament. It goes back to the account of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (I Kings 10). In fact, the last emperor of Ethiopia who died several years ago, Emperor Selassie, traced his genealogy in an unbroken line back that far. The Ethiopian royal line held the throne of Ethiopia for almost three thousand years. So there was continuity.

For someone who was circumcised, such as this Ethiopian who had come to Jerusalem, there wasn't any problem. He could enter into the inner courtyard of the temple. He could enter into the court of the Israelites. He was not confined to the outer court of the Gentiles. The issue had to do

with the physical sign of the covenant. The Jews were prepared to accept a Gentile into religious fellowship if he took upon himself the outward sign of the covenant with Abraham, which was circumcision.

Now the issue arose, beginning in Acts 10, concerning the spiritual necessity of a Gentile man taking upon himself that outward sign of the physical covenant that God had made with Abraham. Was it necessary? You see, the position of many of the religious Jews who were being converted was that if a Gentile wanted to come into the Church, fine, but first he had to become a Jew. Salvation is of the Jews. If you want to become a Christian, first you had to become a Jew; then you become a Christian. This was the controversy.

There was a lot that needed to be resolved in terms of what were the spiritual requirements for salvation. We might also understand the term "Gentile" because the term that is translated "Gentile" throughout the Old Testament, the Hebrew word "*goyim*," simply means "the nations." It was a general term that referred to everyone except the twelve tribes of Israel. Gentiles could be of any race or ethnic background. They could be white, black or yellow. They could be any number of ethnic backgrounds because it was an inclusive term that simply meant everyone except the descendants of Jacob.

Abraham had other children besides Isaac. But the promise line, the seed of promise, came through Isaac. So Abraham's other children would have been considered Gentiles. Ishmael, the Arabs and all of those that descended in that way were considered Gentiles. Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. But because the promise came through Jacob, Esau's descendants would have been considered Gentile. Jacob (his name was changed to Israel) had twelve sons. They became the ancestors of the twelve tribes. The descendants of the twelve tribes, the descendants of Jacob (or Israel) was, let's say, the dividing line. It was a general term. It referred to Israel, and then everyone else was "the nations" or "Gentiles."

The Jews had developed this separateness by the time the New Testament was written. The other tribes of Israel had been dispersed in captivity and disappeared from the scene several hundred years earlier. The Jews were the only ones who were still living there in the Middle East. They were the only ones who preserved and maintained their identity and association with the

Promised Land. So they tended to view themselves as separate and distinct people. God had laid great importance on the fact that Israel maintained their separate and distinct identity from the nations around.

The problem that had developed by the time of the first century was something that went beyond recognizing the need to avoid the corrupting influence of the world and the society around. This is a struggle that God's people all through the centuries have had. You can go back to the beginning of God establishing a people, which was Israel being called out of Egypt. The great battle all the way down has been the tendency of the people of God, collectively, to have that contaminating influence of the world around. It is a necessity that God's people maintain their separate identity because if we're going to please God, we have to conform to God and His ways—not to the world and its ways. The world takes its standards from the devil, in terms of value systems and priorities.

The real problem was the Jews had taken this concept and had developed it into a purely physical concept to where they really looked down on all of the other people as being in some way polluted and dirty. That's why it was such a novel concept.

Even to this day, there are *three requirements for a man who wishes to convert to Orthodox Judaism*. They have maintained these requirements for many centuries. The *first* one was ritual circumcision. *Secondly*, was what they called the "*mikvah*," which was the "ceremonial washing" or the "ritual bath." The *third* was the offering of a sacrifice (a sin offering) there in the temple. Today a convert to Orthodox Judaism goes through the circumcision and the "*mikvah*" and simply makes a pledge that, if the temple is rebuilt in his lifetime, he will offer the appropriate sacrifice.

The concept was that all "the nations" are born in sin; they are dirty and they have to be washed. They are unclean. However, when a Jewish baby is born, they are circumcised and a sacrifice is offered—but there is no "*mikvah*," no ritual bath. Their concept was that they are born clean and everybody else is born unclean. They are better than everyone else. That's why when John the Baptist came and said, "Repent and be baptized," that was a novel concept. The Jews were familiar with this practice of immersion. They were familiar with the Hebrew term "*mikvah*," the immersion, the washing away, but it was something they only applied to Gentile men.

Interestingly enough, at the time of the first century, they also applied it to Jewish women, but they didn't apply it to Jewish men. They considered themselves as having been born clean. That's why Christ told them, 'If the Son shall set you free, then you'll be free indeed.' And boy, they got indignant and said, 'We are Abraham's seed; we have never been in bondage to any man. What do you mean you'll set us free? We don't need to be set free; we're okay.' When John the Baptist came and preached the message, "Repent and be baptized," this was a radical departure. It had never occurred to them that they were unclean, also.

The thrust of John the Baptist's message in preparing the way for the Messiah was the fact that you are unclean. You need to be washed and cleansed. You need a Savior. You are born in sin.

As Paul stressed it in Romans 3:23, "...all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." It is not just the Gentiles that have sinned, but all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Nobody has a spiritual "leg up" based on their ancestry. It's as simple as that.

The issue of baptism was a difficult concept for many of these first-century Jews to grasp. John the Baptist came preaching baptism and many were baptized. They were convicted at least of the fact that they were unclean and needed to repent and be forgiven. Jesus preached baptism and His disciples practiced it. That was never the issue. But the issue of circumcision was another thing. Many of the Jews could accept the fact that they needed to be baptized, that they needed to be washed from their sins. But they also said, 'Gentiles need to be circumcised if they are going to be as good as we are. They need to take upon themselves the outward sign of the covenant that God made to Abraham.' So God made it plain in dealing through Peter that circumcision was not a spiritual matter of salvation.

Now there is nothing that was ever said to discourage the continuing practice among the Jews to circumcise their children on the eighth day after birth. There was never anything to discourage the descendants of Abraham to continue the physical sign of that physical covenant. But it was not a spiritual matter of salvation. It didn't have bearing on salvation. That was not what was involved. God, dealing through Peter (who was the chief of the twelve), revealed that the Gentiles were not in some separate category in that way. And of course,

Peter had this vision that prepared him for this event. It was a major event. As we go through, we recognize the magnitude of it.

I would like to mention something that is sometimes overlooked. When you go through the book of Acts, you see what an issue circumcision was, particularly starting here in Acts 10, and for chapters it keeps coming up and coming up. Then Paul mentions it in his epistles. It was an issue for years, literally for several decades as long as the Church was centered in Jerusalem. From the time of the first Gentile converts and for a good twenty years, it was really an issue; it did not entirely cease to be an issue until the Church was no longer primarily centered there in Jerusalem and in Judea.

But consider—with the modification that was made in regards to circumcision, it was explained that this was not a spiritual requirement of salvation. Spiritually, circumcision was of the heart (Romans 2:25-29) and was not necessary to be performed in order for someone to be saved. If the issue of circumcision created this much controversy, how is it that people think that the Sabbath was changed? You never read a whisper of the controversy in the New Testament.

If circumcision was a big deal to the Jews, do you know what an even bigger deal was? The Sabbath! The two biggest things to the Jews in the first century were idolatry and Sabbath keeping. The prohibitions against idolatry and Sabbath keeping were major issues. That's why meat offered to idols kept coming up. It was a controversial issue. In fact, the Jews had made such an issue of the matter of idolatry that there were riots in Jerusalem when the Roman troops displayed the imperial insignias in a flag over the citadel. The Jews considered it an idolatrous emblem, and there were riots all over Jerusalem. In order to maintain peace in Jerusalem, the Roman troops didn't display the imperial insignias (the Roman eagle) on their flags. The Jews considered it idolatrous because of its connection with Roman gods.

They had such an issue over idolatry, and they took it to such a point—that's why you had all the issues about eating meat offered to idols. It's why you will to this day find certain wines that are labeled kosher wines. Ever noticed that? There are wines that are labeled kosher wines. Do you know why? It's not because any unclean food is used in making any wine. The issue of kosher wine goes back to this time. At the time of the vintage when the wine was made, it was the practice or the custom of the Gentiles in the

Greek and Roman world that the first cup would be poured out in an offering to the god of the vintage—to Bacchus or the various gods. The Jews saw it as everything out there being polluted. It had been offered to idols. Here, this cup had been poured out there in front of that idol. They wouldn't touch it. They would make their own. And to this day, that is where kosher wine comes in. It goes back to the idea that they didn't even want to take a chance that there may have been a cup of this poured out in front of an idol. They wanted nothing to do with idolatry. That's why you also find the subject of meat offered to idols that come up. It was something that had to be resolved in terms of the way it was dealt with.

You never find a mention or a breath of controversy about the Sabbath. Paul was never accused of teaching the Gentiles to break the Sabbath. Now, they got all upset; they accused him of bringing in an uncircumcised Gentile into the inner court of the temple (Acts 21:28), which he didn't do. But they provoked a riot that led to Paul's arrest over that issue. Nobody ever accused him of breaking the Sabbath or teaching against the Sabbath. How can anybody say that the early New Testament Church moved from the Sabbath to Sunday and think that there would never be a hint of a controversy over the subject in the New Testament. Boy, I tell you—the "ripple" about circumcision would have been minor compared to the controversy that would have been had they taught that it was permissible to desecrate the Sabbath and do something else. That is just a sub-point to bring in, which I think is good for us to realize.

In Acts 10:44-48, we are going to notice that when the first uncircumcised Gentiles were baptized (Cornelius, and those with him of his household) there was an unprecedented event that occurred in that context. It is the only example that we have given in Scripture of people who received the Holy Spirit prior to baptism. There was a reason for that miracle.

It was such a hurdle for Peter and those there with him to accept the fact that God was ready to accept the Gentiles on a spiritual basis without their having carried through the physical ritual of circumcision. It was such a major hurdle for them to get over in their mind, that God performed this miracle of giving the Holy Spirit before baptism. Peter looked around at the others and said, 'God's accepted them; how can we not!' And he went ahead and baptized them. It was again a specific example where this miracle of speaking

in other languages was worked at the time of their conversion. There's a reason why that miracle occurred. You don't read that's what normally happened when people were baptized and received the Holy Spirit. Why did God perform that miracle for Cornelius and his household?

It's very evident as to why God had performed that particular miracle for the apostles and for those who were there on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). They were speaking to a multi-lingual audience. Why the necessity of this miracle for Cornelius and his household? I think if we look at it, it is apparent that God performed the same miracle when the first Gentiles were converted as He did when the first Jews were converted. If He didn't, the Jews could have still said, 'Yeah, but yours still is not as good as ours. We are still "one up" on you.' God knew human nature and certainly knew the way that people would reason.

God knew the tendency of people to compare themselves among themselves. So the same miracle was performed to make it apparent that God had not in some way made a spiritual distinction. God does not make spiritual distinctions based on physical criteria. Now obviously, there are physical distinctions. We are male and female. That's pretty physical. But we are heirs together of the grace of life. There are not spiritual distinctions that are made on physical criteria. This was emphasized.

We will note some other things. In fact, we will note something a little later in the book of Acts that will show the extent of some of the multi-ethnic background of many of the early New Testament Church, even the leaders of the New Testament Church. A lot of people have read over and not realized that all of the early New Testament Church did not come from an exclusively ethnic Jewish background. We have already mentioned the Ethiopian eunuch who was a clear case in point. But let's continue. We will come to it.

In Acts 10, we noted the first uncircumcised Gentile convert. This was Cornelius, the Roman Centurion. He was an Italian and a leader of a group who were stationed in Judea (v. 1). There were a significant number of soldiers who were stationed in Judea as a part of Roman troop detachments, as well as others who came in contact with the Jews who were impressed with the teachings of Scripture.

The bankrupt pagan mythology that was extant in the first-century Greek and Roman world had

long since lost its hold in terms of really filling any kind of void for people who thought very much. Many of the Gentiles in some of these areas who were exposed to Jewish culture were impressed with the teaching of Scripture. They recognized standards and recognized answers that were something beyond anything that they had from their background. Many of these became proselytes or converts. They were called "proselytes of the gate." In other words, if they came to the temple, they never could go past the gate because they did not become circumcised and take upon themselves the full commitment of the covenant, which circumcision involved. But they attended the synagogue and would listen to the Scriptures read. They would practice many of the principles of the law. They recognized its moral value and worth. They saw that there was something here, but they stopped short of becoming circumcised and becoming, in the eyes of Greek and Roman society, a Jew. This was a major step to take and most did not do that.

Verse 2, Cornelius, we are told, was a devout man. He, evidently, had been exposed to the teaching of Scripture there in Judea. He had, undoubtedly, spent time attending synagogue and hearing the law read. He was impressed with many of these things. He had come to believe in the true God—the God of Israel. He recognized that the idols that the Greek and Roman world worshipped were nothing. There came a point in time when he was sincerely seeking God; God heard and honored his request.

In vv. 3-8, Cornelius was told where to go and find Peter.

In v. 9, it was around noon (we are told the sixth hour, which would have been noon counting from sunrise) when Peter went upon the housetop.

Of course, their housetops were a flat style and not what we think of as housetops with the Acadian style as here in south Louisiana. That would have been kind of a difficult place to navigate. You wouldn't want to climb up on that kind of roof to pray—you definitely would feel like praying if you were balanced precariously up there. That's not the kind of housetop Peter was on. In an area where there isn't a lot of rain, they utilize a flat rooftop. With a little bit of drainage, it wasn't a problem. There wasn't much rainfall. It was often an area that expanded the living area. You'd get up there in the cool of the evening or when the sun began to set. It was a little cooler up there; you would pick up a little bit more of a breeze.

Verse 10, Peter had gone up there. It was a private place and he was waiting for them to prepare lunch. He was hungry and went up there to pray. While he was up there praying, waiting for the meal to be prepared, he went into a trance, and had a vision.

Verses 11-12, in this vision he saw a sheet come down from heaven. On this sheet was every kind of creature you can imagine. Now this is proof that Peter did not come from south Louisiana because when he saw all those creeping things, he didn't jump up and have a crayfish boil.

Acts 10:13-16, "...Not so, Lord. I have never eaten anything common or unclean." When he was told to rise, kill and eat, he said, 'No, I can't do that.' Now this vision was repeated three times.

Peter was really scratching his head. He couldn't figure out what it meant. A lot of people today jump to the conclusion that they know what it means. They think that they can eat anything that doesn't eat them first. Almost all of us (you did and I did) grew up eating all kind of things. I think about some of the things I used to eat, and it spoils my appetite to even think about them. I don't even want to describe it at mealtime. I'm sure you are the same way. But there was a time when we ate it and didn't think anything about it. But Peter didn't jump to that conclusion. He couldn't figure out what it meant.

Peter had spent three and one-half years with Jesus Christ, living with Him, spending day after day together. They camped out together; they ate meals together; and they spent hours together, day after day over a period of three and one-half years. There was nothing that Christ had ever said which in any way gave Peter the indication that he should be eating unclean foods. Peter had never eaten anything common or unclean. It's obvious that Jesus didn't either, because Peter was with Him, and they ate the same thing during the years of His ministry. Peter didn't jump to the conclusion that the laws against clean and unclean had been done away. That never occurred to him.

Verse 17 says afterwards that he doubted in himself—he wondered—what this vision he had seen could mean. He couldn't figure it out.

About this time word came to him.

Verses 18-19, somebody downstairs wanted to see him. It was a Gentile.

Verses 20-23, he was told to go home with them and not to worry or be disturbed about it. So he went down and found out what the situation was. They explained it to him, and Peter accompanied

them. Several of the other brethren went with them and came to Caesarea.

Verse 24, Cornelius waited for them. He had called together his relatives and his close friends.

Verse 25, when Peter came in, Cornelius met him, fell down at his feet and worshipped him. Now if Peter had been the Pope, he would have told him, 'Here, kiss right here on this big toe.' Peter didn't tell him that. It is pretty good evidence that Peter didn't view himself as the first Pope. He didn't have people bowing down and kissing his feet. When the man did that, he told him to stand up, 'don't be groveling down there on the ground trying to kiss my feet.'

Verse 26, '...stand up, for I am a man just like you are. I am a human being.'

Cornelius had come from Rome from a religious background where the religious leaders were venerated in that way. Well, that's not God's way. God's way is certainly a way of respect.

God tells us to respect those who are older, respect our elders, rise up before the hoary (gray) head (Leviticus 19:32). Certainly we are to respect our elders and use terms of respect that are appropriate. Just as we show respect to those who are elders, physically, it is certainly just as appropriate and just as proper to show respect to those who are our spiritual elders. To show proper respect for another human being or respect for an office or age is one thing, and something we should show to one another. But there's a difference between an appropriate respect and an attitude of veneration, worship, adoration and this type of thing.

That's why in God's Church we don't use some specific religious titles. We don't call ourselves "reverend" because we read in Psalm 111:9 (KJV), "... holy and reverend is His name." Since that's God's name, we never talked about Reverend Armstrong. We don't use those terms because they would be inappropriate. Holy and reverend is God's name. We refer to them respectfully in the same way we refer to older people or to any people we would hold in respect. We refer to our spiritual leaders with a courtesy title of respect that we use in this society, not with a religious title.

We see here this attitude. It is good to notice that a lot of the things associated with a certain religion, where the head of it calls himself the successor of St. Peter—he doesn't follow the example of Peter. If you are going to claim to be Peter's successor, then you need to be held to the same standard of doing what Peter did. Do you practice the things that Peter practices?

A little while later, it began to dawn on him what his vision had been.

Acts 10:28, "...'God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.'" Now Peter got the point of his vision. He realized what this was all about. He had been putting people, human beings made in the image of God, in the same category as an unclean animal. Peter was viewing them in kind of the same context, using the same terms, and he had come to realize and to see that was wrong. That was an attitude of prejudice. That was not reflective of God's perspective at all. Peter recognized that.

As we go through Acts 10, we note the rest of the story of Cornelius and his household receiving the Holy Spirit prior to baptism.

Verses 44-48, "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision, who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, 'Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit?' And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days."

This, of course, demonstrated that a man did not first have to be circumcised before he could be part of the Church. God made it clear. If there is something of this magnitude, God makes it clear. God does not make a change (that is a change from God) in some obscure way that leaves people confused, where you can't know which is which. When God made a specific change, in terms of circumcision, He made it plain to the New Testament Church. He did it in a very plain and a dramatic way that was a clear basis that anyone could look to. God's will was plain.

Acts 11:1-3, "Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, 'You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!'" Peter came back to Jerusalem, and needless to say, there were people that were upset. 'You ate with uncircumcised men!' Boy, they were upset about that. There was a prejudice that was there. It had its origin, in terms of religion, that carried over in all of these ways. Obviously, it came down to viewing every non-Jew in an unclean category. The average Jew wouldn't think of going in and eating a meal at a Gentile's table. That was

unthinkable. So they were pretty upset when they heard Peter had done this.

Verses 4-14, Peter then explained the matter from the beginning. He went through and told them the story; he made it clear that it was from God.

Then he says in v. 15, "'And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning.'" It was not the way the Holy Spirit normally came every time. 'It was the way the Holy Spirit fell on us at the beginning.' We go back to that point. God wanted to make it plain that Gentiles didn't get a second-rate baptism or a second-rate conversion. Peter goes through and explains what happened.

Verse 16, in the light of what had happened, he began to understand some scriptures that he had not previously understood.

Verses 17-18, when all this was explained, those who were there glorified God and said God was also granting repentance to the Gentiles.

Verse 19, in the meantime, the Church had been scattered. There was a persecution that had arisen after the stoning of Stephen. Much of the Church had been scattered. For the first couple of years the Church had remained right there centered in Jerusalem. When Stephen was stoned in 33 A.D., persecution broke out. The result was it forced people to begin to leave, to spread out. There had been a reluctance to leave the center of action. The result was that, as people began to spread, the knowledge of the truth began to spread.

Verses 20-22, it had come to the attention of the apostles that there were a number there in Antioch.

Verse 19, there were some from the area of Judea who had gone there; they had been talking about the truth, about the Church, and the knowledge of the Messiah—but only to the Jews. They had been doing so, certainly, in the synagogues at Antioch.

Verse 22, when word came to Jerusalem, the decision was made at headquarters that since there was interest in Antioch, they needed to send a minister who would go to Antioch to take charge of the situation. Here we see a clear account of Church government. The people in Antioch didn't get together and send a pulpit committee out to find somebody to preach what they liked and invite him to come there. When something came to the attention of headquarters, the apostles in Jerusalem sent Barnabas. He was sent down there as the pastor.

Verse 25, when Barnabas came, he went on to Tarsus—which was not all that far away—to seek Saul.

You remember that Saul, or Paul, had been converted several years earlier. He had been struck down on the road to Damascus. He had come to repentance, been baptized and converted; he had gone to Jerusalem but had not been that well accepted. They had accepted him, but they really didn't want him hanging around there. Because there was a little bit of skepticism, he stayed there about two weeks, got acquainted with several of the apostles and left.

In Galatians 1:17-18, we find that he spent a period of about three years in Arabia, there in the desert, having been taught directly by Christ (vv. 11-12). He came back through Jerusalem and was there for a short time. But at that time there was not a place for him. He was told, 'The best thing for you to do is to go back to Tarsus where you came from and get a job. Don't call us; we'll call you!' So that's what he did.

He knew that God works through the leadership He has established and ordained. When Barnabas, whom Paul had met and talked with right after his conversion (and evidently kept tabs on him), was sent to Antioch to pastor the Church, he went to Tarsus and brought Paul back to Antioch with him (vv. 25-26). Paul was evidently ordained as an elder at that time because we will note later that Paul was an elder in the Church at Antioch, although he's listed in the tail end of the list of the ministers serving there in Antioch (Acts 13:1).

Barnabas went there to Tarsus and Paul entered the ministry full time. Saul (as he was known then) came back to Antioch to assist Barnabas. There's a period of a year that went by and the Church built up there in Antioch.

Verses 27-29, we find that there were prophets from Jerusalem that came down to Antioch with the message of a famine. There was a certain relief that was sent.

In Acts 12:1-2, we pick up the story of the first apostle to be martyred. Herod had James killed. This was James, the brother of John. When he saw that this was popular, he decided that he would finish off some of the others as well.

Verse 3, he arrested Peter and was going to execute him after the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Verses 5-11, the Church prayed and besought God's intervention. God intervened in a very dramatic way. He sent an angel and brought Peter out of jail.

Verses 12-16, when Peter came there to the house where all the people were praying, they were so shocked that they almost didn't believe their prayers had been answered. That's sometimes the case. We pray for a miracle, and then we are amazed when it occurs. We need to not only pray for it, we need to expect it! This created quite a stir.

Verse 25, Barnabas and Saul remained there in Antioch. They had come down to Jerusalem and had returned to Antioch.

Acts 13:1-3, "Now in the Church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away."

Now, who laid on the hands? Well, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene and Manaen. These were, evidently, prophets that had been sent down from Jerusalem. We are told they are prophets and teachers. Barnabas is listed first in the list because he was pastor of the Church. He had been sent down from Jerusalem as the Church pastor. These others who had evidently come down from Jerusalem were prophets from Jerusalem.

Verses 2-3, they were given revelation from God because what we have here is the ordination of Paul and Barnabas as apostles. This is what we have—an ordination. They fasted and prayed and laid hands on them; then they sent them away. They were sent out. That's what "apostle" means. They were sent forth. This is the ordination.

I think it is interesting to note—I mentioned the multi-ethnic background of the leadership of the early New Testament Church. 'Simeon that was called Niger'—"Niger" is the Greek word for "black." It specifically refers to Blacks from the area of West Africa. We have today the Niger River, the nation of Nigeria. It comes from the same term. The term "Ethiopian" was used as a general term to refer to Blacks from East Africa, just as the term "Niger" was used as a general term to refer to Blacks from West Africa.

The Roman Empire took in portions of Northern Africa. Cyrene was in North Africa in the area around where Tunisia is today. That was a part of the Roman Empire, but the Roman Empire did not include East or West Africa down in the area of Ethiopia. Ethiopia maintained its

independence, and so did certain kingdoms in West Africa. There was trade and commerce. There was a familiarity in the Greek and Roman world with people of both East and West African origin. There was trade and a certain amount of commerce there on the border of the Empire. It was not uncommon.

We are not introduced to anything of the background of this individual (this Simeon called Niger), except that it is clear from his surname what his origin was. He was a West African from the area that we would refer to as the area of the Niger River in West Africa. We are not given any details at what point he came into the Church or at what point he had been ordained in the ministry. We are not given background on that. We are simply introduced to him, as well as to Lucius of Cyrene of whom we are told nothing else. The only thing we know about Manaen was that he was of an aristocratic background. He had actually grown up with Herod. He had been a friend and companion of many of the upper class.

What we see is that the leadership of the New Testament Church had been called from a variety of backgrounds, ethnically and culturally. It wasn't any longer exclusively Palestinian Jews. In fact, Simeon and the other two were the ones by whom God actually ordained Paul and Barnabas as apostles. We get a little bit of insight into the beginning of the impact of the New Testament Church. These prophets had been sent from Jerusalem headquarters to Antioch. God had given them that commission.

At this point, after the ordination of Barnabas and Saul, we find that Barnabas and Saul left to begin the **first evangelistic journey**. They sailed from Antioch and went to Cypress. Then they went up to central Asia Minor and preached in the area that we know as Galatia. Then they came back over land down to Antioch. If you look at a map, you will see that Antioch is in the modern nation of Syria. They went from there across a small stretch of the Mediterranean to the island of Cypress, then up to ancient Asia Minor (the central portion of modern-day Turkey), the area of Galatia. They went there, traveled overland through Asia Minor (or modern-day Turkey) and then came back down the coast over land to come back to Antioch. This was the first evangelistic journey that they made. The account of it is given in Acts 13 and 14.

Beginning in Acts 13:9, there is one thing that we find plainly evident. We see that the name Paul begins to be used in place of Saul, which was the

Hebrew name. Paul was the Roman name that he had, and Saul was his Hebrew name. As he began traveling in the Gentile areas, he elected to go by his Roman name. We see that switch over at that time.

We find in Acts 13:5 Paul's address to the Jews in Cyprus and the sermon he gave. I will refer back to this a little later.

One thing I would like to call your attention to. I mentioned earlier, in terms of the Sabbath, the fact that there isn't any New Testament evidence at all of any controversy about a change of the Sabbath. If anybody were going to change it, certainly Paul would have done it when he preached to the Gentiles.

But we are told in Acts 13:42, "And when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath."

Paul could have told them, 'You don't need to wait until next Sabbath. We are going to have church service for you Gentiles ten o'clock Sunday morning. We are going to have Sunday services. You don't need to wait until the Sabbath. The Sabbath has been done away!' Why didn't he explain that? Because it wasn't true! These Gentiles (Greeks primarily) in the area of Asia Minor came up and said, 'We'd like for you to preach to us next Sabbath. We would like to get together and hear you.'

And we are told in v. 44, "And the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God." It is very clear that Paul was preaching to the Gentiles on the Sabbath, as well as the Jews. Some say, 'Yeah, Paul preached to the Jews on the Sabbath. He went to the synagogue because that's where the Jews were. He didn't go there because he believed it; he just went there because that's where the audience was.' Well, if that was the case, the Gentiles didn't normally keep the Sabbath; so why did he preach to them on the Sabbath? Why didn't he use that as an opportunity to introduce Sunday worship? It's very plain when we go through the scriptures that Paul did not institute Sunday worship among the Gentiles.

We see that the main persecution Paul faced was religious persecution from the Jewish religious leadership.

Verse 45, "But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul." They were really jealous.

Verse 50, “But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region.” They stirred up a great controversy.

Acts 14:2, “But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren.” They began to spread all kinds of rumors and gossip. There were all sorts of problems that were stirred up.

We see the account in chapters 13 and 14 of the trip back that Paul made over land and the arrival back in Antioch. This was the first large-scale conversion of Gentiles where large congregations were raised up in some of these areas that, primarily, consisted of Gentiles with a very small Jewish contingent. The issue of uncircumcised Gentiles being accepted into full fellowship was still kind of “cooking” and there was a problem. There was a controversy that came up.

Acts 15:1, “And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’” There were some that came down from Jerusalem and began to tell some of the brethren that it was fine to be baptized, but they still need to be circumcised. ‘I know you’ve been baptized and received the Holy Spirit, but if you are going to be saved, you still have to be circumcised.’

It stirred up a controversy and a dispute. When this doctrinal matter came up, it was not something that could be entirely addressed there locally. Paul and Barnabas decided to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders there about the question and have it resolved once and for all. There would be an official statement of Church position.

Verse 2, “Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders, about this question.” We see the recognition of the concept that God is not the author of confusion (I Corinthians 14:33). There is peace. We see that there was a discussion. As the leadership in Jerusalem came together, there was a lot of discussion. Peter finally rose up.

Verse 7, “And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up, and said to them: ‘Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.’”

Verses 7-11, Peter began to recount the situation from the beginning as to how God had originally opened the door to the Gentiles through him. He went through, recounted it and explained it; he brought it through, step by step, exactly what had happened.

Verse 12, “Then all the multitude kept silent, and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.” They explained all the things that God had done through them on this evangelistic journey. They added to and reinforced the things that Peter had said. Once these things had been stated, this kind of concluded the discussion.

Verses 13-15, “And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, ‘Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon [Peter] has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written....’” James got up and made the official pronouncement. He was the brother of Jesus Christ. He was an apostle. He was not one of the twelve, but he held the rank of apostle. He was the pastor there of the Jerusalem Church and presided over the conference. Since he was the one who was presiding, he then said, ‘All right, Simon [Peter] has explained how this whole matter started.’

Verses 15-17, he invoked scriptural principles from the Old Testament that backed that up.

Verse 19 (KJV), “‘Therefore my sentence is....’” The word “sentence” is the Greek word “*krino*.” It is a legal technical term in the Greek that refers to “a judgment” in the sense that a court would make a judgment. It is in the sense of a judge passing sentence or a judgment. It was an official legal decision. He was saying, ‘All right, everything has been discussed. We have heard it. Peter has explained what God revealed to him and what God did through him. Paul and Barnabas have told you what occurred. We have listened to all of this, and the scriptures certainly prophesied and anticipated of the event that we have experienced and gone through. Wherefore, my sentence, my official statement, my official legal decision, the binding decision of the Church is....’

Verse 19, “‘...that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God.’” This was concerning circumcision.

Verses 20-23, “‘But that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and

from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.’ Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. They wrote this letter by them....”

Verses 23-29, a letter was written, and it was dispatched stating the decision of the Church.

Let’s note something here. Some quote this statement in v. 20 and say, ‘You see, James didn’t say anything about the Gentiles keeping the Sabbath. Therefore, it is very obvious that the Gentiles don’t have to keep the Sabbath. All of that’s done away. They weren’t told to keep the Sabbath.’

Well, that’s right! They weren’t told to keep the Sabbath; neither were they told not to commit murder. If v. 20 does away with the fourth commandment to remember the Sabbath, it also does away with the sixth commandment not to murder because that’s not mentioned either. In fact, there’s nothing here that says the Gentiles shouldn’t steal or shouldn’t lie or covet or dishonor their parents. There are a lot of commandments that are not mentioned. Most people who want to do away with the Sabbath aren’t quite so anxious to do away with murder, particularly, if they are on the receiving end of the gun. They generally figure that’s a good commandment to have around.

Why isn’t the Sabbath mentioned? Well, the Sabbath isn’t mentioned because it wasn’t a question. James didn’t answer it because nobody asked the question. That simply had never come up. What had come up and was being discussed was circumcision. When they address the subject of circumcision and they say, ‘All right, circumcision applies in the spirit. It is a circumcision of the heart (Romans 2:28-29). The physical ceremonial requirement of circumcision is not necessary for salvation.’ Then that raises the question of what about some of these other things that are so uncommon and strange in the Greek and Roman world? Are they also ceremonial? What about meat offered to idols? Is there anything wrong with that? What about morality? Do the prohibitions of morality apply?

Most of us have trouble associating the concept of morality with some of these other matters. But what you have to realize is that the whole concept of chastity and morality was such an

uncommon thing in the Greek and Roman world that it was looked upon as a peculiarity of the Jews. Immorality (fornication) involved in idolatrous temple worship and this kind of thing was taken for granted. Immoral practices were so taken for granted in the Greek and Roman world of the first century, that it was a real culture shock to some of these who came out of this kind of background. They needed to recognize the importance that God placed on morality. The Jews placed great emphasis on it. What the Gentile converts had to realize was that this was not simply a peculiarity of the Jews. God placed great emphasis on it.

We are almost coming back to a situation like that in our society today. There is no sense of scandal being attached to immorality in a way that was common twenty-five or thirty years ago. It was common that immorality was a scandal. It is so taken for granted and accepted now, that many young people growing up in this society and surrounded by the attitudes of a society evidenced at school and through the media, etc., have trouble grasping, ‘What’s the big deal?’ Now, that’s a concept that some of us who grew up thirty or forty years ago and longer may have trouble grasping. How can you not understand what a big deal it is? We have to realize how much the culture in this nation has changed in the course of a generation—a drastic change that we could date to the 60s. You could pick various benchmarks, but I think the most recent radical change began in the 60s—particularly, by the mid-60s the toboggan slide had really begun to become evident.

These were issues in the Gentile world, and they had to be addressed. What James makes plain is that these other things you wondered about are not ceremonial. You should abstain from pollutions of idols, from immorality, from things strangled and from blood. This had to do with the methods of slaughter and the use of blood as a matter of diet. There were some questions about some of these things; James summarized it to make it plain.

Now, concerning the matter of blood—the Jehovah’s Witnesses take this and make a big issue of blood transfusions. Blood transfusions are not being discussed here. It is discussing dietary laws. It is not a verse that has any bearing on blood transfusion, one way or the other. Notice what James went on to say. Why did James not feel it necessary to do anything more than clarify these points that had been raised? He

answered the questions that had been asked, and he didn't feel the need to explain more. Why?

Verse 21, "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath." It was apparent that James knew and accepted that the brethren were going to go and hear the Scriptures and the Law read every Sabbath. The Gentiles were going to the synagogue and were hearing the Law read every Sabbath. James said, 'I don't need to explain any further because you will hear it read in the synagogue. You will hear it on the Sabbath when you go listen to the Law being read.' It is very apparent that James didn't say, 'Hey, you Gentiles are going to the synagogue on the Sabbath and listening to the Law being read; don't you know the Sabbath is done away? The Law is done away, and you shouldn't be going. All it is going to do is get you confused.' He didn't tell them that did he? So again, it is important to note. The letter was written and sent forth.

Verses 40-41, "But Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches." Paul and Silas were going on their **second evangelistic journey**. This time they were going to leave and go over land up through Syria and across through Asia Minor.

Acts 16:1, "Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek." They came through the area of Galatia.

Verse 3, "Paul wanted to have him [Timothy] go with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek."

You notice this. The issue had been resolved. It was not a spiritual matter, but they did circumcise Timothy. There is a reason. Timothy's mother was a Jew and his father was a Greek. It was known in the area what Timothy's background was. Timothy, being of a Jewish background, would have been a stumbling block to the Jews. They would have viewed Timothy as a traitor to his own people. Paul recognized this. It wasn't that Timothy needed to be circumcised in order to be saved, but Paul recognized that it would be a stumbling block in Timothy's ministry if the Jews viewed him as one who was kind of a traitor to his people. They viewed it as rejecting the outward sign of the covenant, and it would brand him as one who identified with his

father's Greek heritage and rejected his mother's Jewish heritage—which would obviously be an issue of contention in the Church. The simplest thing was that he be circumcised; it would not be an issue.

So this was done. Paul and the group traveled across to the coast of Asia Minor and into what is Europe (modern-day Greece).

Verse 9, he saw the vision of the man in Macedonia. Macedonia is northern Greece. He crossed over from Asia Minor into Europe.

Verse 13, "And on the Sabbath day, we went out of the city to the river side, where prayer was customarily made: and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there." This is the first time the gospel went out in Europe.

Now, in my KJV Bible, there is a little "4" out by the word Sabbath. The marginal rendering is "Sabbath Days." This has a different ending in the Greek that is like a plural ending. It means it's not the common way of writing "Sabbath." It would more literally be "on the day of Sabbaths." It was a term used among the Jews to refer to Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks or the Day of the Sabbaths because you counted seven Sabbaths to arrive at it. We would date the first sermon Paul preached here in Europe as Pentecost of 50 A.D.

The interesting thing to note is the New Testament Church began on Pentecost of 31 A.D. Exactly nineteen years to the day later the gospel first went into Europe. Of course, God's whole calendar is based on a nineteen-year cycle. The calendar repeats itself every nineteen years. Exactly nineteen years after Pentecost, the gospel first went out into Europe.

Exactly nineteen years after that on Pentecost of 69 A.D. there was a voice in the temple. The Jews heard thunder, but the Christians heard a message, and the Church fled Jerusalem. In the aftermath, the Roman troops came in, surrounded the city and Jerusalem fell. It was destroyed in 70 A.D.

You can divide the organized proclamation of the gospel by the early New Testament Church into two nineteen-year periods. It is just a matter of historical reference in the Scriptures.

Verse 12, we see that Paul was preaching in the area of Macedonia. Let me call your attention again to what Paul was preaching and the way he was identified. After Paul had cast a demon out of a girl, her master brought them to the magistrate.

Verse 20, "And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, 'These men, being Jews,

exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe.” Notice that Paul was being accused of teaching Jewish customs. That’s what they accused him of. If Paul had come in and had been preaching Sunday, Christmas, Easter and doing all this stuff, he wouldn’t have been creating a problem. They would have been familiar with all those things. Those were good old Roman holidays. He wouldn’t have been teaching customs unlawful for the Romans. They wouldn’t have identified him as being Jewish. Paul was looked upon as teaching Jewish customs.

He was accused of the same thing that the Church is accused of today. People think Paul is the one who did away with the law. It’s very plain. You never find Paul being accused of that. In fact, it’s interesting, a little later on, when Paul came to Ephesus. The people who were the angriest were the silversmiths (19:24-27) because they were in the idol-making business. They got all upset and said, ‘This guy is going to put us out of business.’ Now if Paul had been a good Catholic, they wouldn’t have been upset. They would have just switched over into making crucifixes and all kinds of little trinkets. Paul would have been good for the business. They would have been glad to see him there. It would have just added something extra to sell. But what Paul taught was going to put these guys out of business because all of a sudden, there was not going to be any demand for all of their little idols and shrines, all their little religious figurines that dotted the countryside. I think it is important to note some of these things as we go through.

Acts is not so much the teachings of the apostles. Though it tells us what they said, Acts does not primarily focus on the teachings—it focuses on the *actions*. It is important that we note what these actions were. We notice how much these actions contrast with the things that pass for Christianity in our modern society and country. People accuse us of not being a New Testament Church. People say, ‘You just have the Old Testament; you don’t really follow the New Testament!’ Well, yes we do! We follow the New Testament, as well as the Old Testament. In reality, they follow neither. They follow the customs and traditions of men. They follow the things that you don’t find here in the book of Acts.

Acts 16:21-24, we find Paul being thrown into jail because he was “teaching customs that are not lawful.”

Verses 25-26, they were praying. About midnight, God sent a big earthquake.

Verses 27-28, the jailer got so scared that he was going to commit suicide. He just knew all these prisoners were going to get away. Paul stopped him and said, ‘Don’t do that. We are all here.’ This jailer was so impressed that he brought these men out.

Verse 30, “And he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’” He was familiar with who they were and what they had been teaching.

Verse 31, “So they said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him, and to all who were in his house.” They went through and explained.

He was familiar with what Paul and Barnabas were doing. They had been thrown in jail for teaching the necessity of observing Jewish customs (as the Roman government looked upon it). He was familiar with all of these things. He was familiar with their message. He knew who they were and why they were in jail. When he saw the hand of God, he was so impressed that he asked, ‘What do I need to do to act on all of this?’ They told him, ‘You are going to have to believe, to really believe what Jesus said.’

Now, you can’t take this out of context and say that’s all you have to do is believe. They continued and spoke to him the word of the Lord. They went through and explained to him. He had already heard these other things.

Verse 33, we find that he was baptized. The next day they found out that Paul was a Roman citizen, so the magistrate said, ‘We are just going to kind of send these guys away and get them out of here.’

Verse 37, “But Paul said to them, ‘They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No, indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out.’” Paul said, ‘You’ve beaten us openly and illegally. You want us to leave? You come ask us nicely.’

Paul was not averse to utilizing the rights of Roman citizenship. He submitted to the government authorities. But there is a time, particularly in terms of the work of God, that it is important that we avail ourselves of the rights and privileges that the laws of the land give us. Paul availed himself of those rights and privileges. But recognize that’s not where our protection is going to come from. Our protection

comes from God, but those things can be properly utilized.

Acts 17:1-2, "...they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures."

Verses 10-11, "Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." They checked it out. They proved it out of the Bible.

That's what is important! God wants us to prove out of the Bible the things that we hear so our faith and our confidence rest upon Him and upon His word. We are to really prove what we believe and why we believe it.

Paul went from there to Rome.

Verse 16, they took him there while he was waiting for the others to join him. They took him to Mars Hill, the Areopagus (v. 19).

Verse 21, "For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing." We are told they loved to discuss things, and they prided themselves on really being open-minded. They always wanted to hear something new. They were always coming up with something. We see that example. Paul took advantage of the opportunity. He went there to Mars Hill and had an opportunity to speak. He addressed them. I would call your attention to the way he handled it.

Verse 22, "Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious [KJV].'" The KJV gives kind of a negative impression. That is not really the sense of it. Paul didn't start out in a negative way. Some of the modern translations bring it out a little more clearly. What he really said was, 'I perceive that you are very religious.' Paul didn't start out insulting them.

He said in vv. 22-26 (paraphrase), 'Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious people. I have noticed your devotions, the outward signs of your religion; one of the things I noticed was that you even have an altar dedicated TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. It is this Unknown God that I wish to tell you about this afternoon. He is the One you ignorantly worship, this

Unknown God, who is unknown to you. You don't know Him. I want to explain Him to you today. He is the God that made the world and all things that are therein. He is the Creator.'

Paul goes through and begins to explain. He starts by introducing the Athenians to the God who is the Creator of the Greek people. He comes through, and then, finally, we have the conclusion of his summary.

Verse 31, "'because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.'"

I would call your attention to something. In Acts 17, as Paul went through and addressed the issue, he didn't mention the name of Jesus Christ. If you compared the sermon Paul gave in Acts 17 to the one he gave the Jews in Acts 13, it's totally different. In Acts 13, he started out quoting the Bible. He's quoting Scripture—bang, bang, bang—straight Bible all the way through.

Why the difference? You address people in a way that they are going to be receptive and understand what you are talking about. If you are addressing people who acknowledge the authority of Scripture, then you start with the Bible and quote the Bible to them. If you are addressing people who don't even know what is the Bible, then you don't start out by quoting the Bible. There is no point. They don't even know what's under discussion.

The way that Paul addressed the Athenians was much the same way as Mr. Herbert Armstrong began his initial addresses in some of the Gentile nations—in Japan and some of these places. In fact, he used Acts 17 as a guide. This was the way you addressed people. In that context, you then bring them to the point of recognizing that there is a Messiah and there is One who is coming to judge the world.