

The Book of Acts
“Good Word” Study Guide
July—September, 2018

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Paul Dybdahl

Guests for the taping of this series of Good Word discussions are Brant Berglin and Carl Cosaert, both New Testament scholars in the School of Theology at Walla Walla University. My name is Paul Dybdahl, and I will be the moderator of our recorded discussions and author of this study guide. Please note that free audio recordings of our discussions each week are available through the Walla Walla University School of Theology website. You may access these recordings and this printed guide at <https://goodword.wallawalla.edu/>

Introduction and Aim

Before using this discussion guide, the reader should be aware of several assumptions made by the author. First, I assume this study guide will be used in close connection with the Adult Sabbath School Study Guide prepared by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. This quarter, the adult Sabbath School lessons were written by Wilson Paroschi. Paroschi is a professor of New Testament at Brazil Adventist University. He has earned a Ph.D. from Andrews University and has completed post-doctoral work at the University of Heidelberg.

Sabbath School teachers should take note of what he has written and use his material to provide background information and to flesh out what is missing in this “Good Word” guide. I have borrowed freely from Paroschi’s material, particularly his discussion questions. Readers of this discussion guide will notice those parallels. At the same time, I will not merely reformat and repeat what is available in Paroschi’s source. Careful readers will note these distinct differences.

Second, I assume that those using this guide will carefully read the applicable biblical material. Questions posed in this study guide may not make sense unless one has already grappled with the biblical passage. Hopefully, readers will also have access to one or two Bible commentaries dealing with the relevant biblical material.

My Aim

In writing a study guide such as this, I will attempt to emulate the Jesus of Mark 8. In this crucial passage in Mark, Jesus does very little explaining. Instead, he asks questions. In fact, in Mark 8:17-29 (NIV), Jesus asks nine consecutive questions.

So, readers will quickly see that this study guide is primarily a collection of questions. Some may seem simplistic, some tangential, and some even dangerous. As best you can, however, look carefully at the biblical material and reflect on the questions provided. Then, ask your own questions. Be wary of pat answers that come too easily and seem too obvious. At the same time, avoid thinking that nothing is certain. Ultimately, I hope that honest, prayerful questions will lead us to insight, to truth, and to a renewed sense of our calling to carry the good news to every kindred, nation, tongue, and people. May God guide us in this sacred task.

Leading Question: As Christians, we believe that the Bible is inspired by God. Why, then, would we be interested in questions of authorship, intended audience, and date of writing? What difference does it make since it is the word of God?

1. In Acts 1:1, the author refers to “my former book” and then mentions the name Theophilus. This leads to some questions regarding the historical context of the book. For example:

Who wrote the book of Acts? What do we know about this author?

What is the “former book” that is mentioned?

Who is Theophilus?

What was the author’s purpose?

When was the book written?

How might the answers to these questions impact the way we read the book?

2. If we look at the book of Acts as a whole, what is the story that is being told?

3. How is the book of Acts organized, at its most basic level? (Acts 1:8 provides a bit of a geographic outline, and some have simply noted that the first half of the book focuses on the ministry of Peter, while the second half focuses on Saul/Paul.)

4. Acts 1 sets the groundwork for the rest of the book.

In verses 3-5, Jesus asks the disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem? Why? Did they need to stay there? And didn’t they already have the Spirit? How is being “baptized” with the Spirit somehow different from what they had already experienced?

In Acts 1:12-23, the focus shifts on replacing Judas. After the death of Judas, the disciples seemed determined to take find someone to take his place. Why was there this emphasis on having an even twelve apostles?

The selection of a new leader involved several steps: corporate prayer involving men and women, articulation of criteria for the new leader, nominations, more prayer, and finally, the casting of lots. What should we learn about the selection of church leaders from this process?

How is this process different from current practice in the church? What are the benefits and drawbacks of each approach?

The text tells us that the group of believers numbered 120. Does this seem like a small or a large group? In other words, if God came to earth in human form, lived among us for over 30 years, healed the sick, raised the dead, and preached to thousands, what size of “church” would you expect him to have left behind?

5. There is a consistent emphasis on the importance of the Holy Spirit in this chapter. Do we know what it means to be “baptized” with the Holy Spirit? What are the dangers of witnessing to the world without this baptism? How would one seek this baptism, and what are the indications that it has been received?

Leading Question: The title of our lesson today is Pentecost. What does this word mean?

1. The “Pentecost” of Acts 2 is often called the birthday of the church. The word itself means “fiftieth.” How can a first birthday be started at the number fifty? What’s going on here? What is the significance of this particular Jewish festival?

2. In Acts 2:1-4, the coming of the Holy Spirit is described in dramatic terms. How should we understand the events described here? What is important for us to notice?

Should followers of Jesus seek out and expect similar experiences today?

What are the dangers of seeking such an experience?

What are the dangers of avoiding or denying such experiences?

Which danger is greatest for the church today? How about for you, personally?

4. In Acts 2:4, the Holy Spirit enabled Jesus’ followers to speak in tongues.

What is the gift being described here?

Is this the same gift of tongues that is described in 1 Corinthians 12-14?

Should all believers expect to receive this gift of tongues?

5. Read Acts 2:14-36.

Peter begins his sermon by declaring that the Pentecost experience is a fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy regarding the last days. So, when did the last days begin?

Which of the signs mentioned (the pouring out of the Spirit on all people, the prophetic gift, the signs in the heavens, salvation for all who call on the name of the Lord) seems most significant to you?

In the last days, is the gift of prophecy given to few or to many? If it is many, where are all the prophets today? How would we identify a prophet if we came across one? Have you ever prophesied?

In Peter’s gospel presentation, which is more heavily emphasized: the death of Jesus or the resurrection of Jesus? The humility of Jesus or the glorification and authority of Jesus? What is the significance of this? What should our emphasis be?

6. Acts 2:37-41 records the response to Peter’s testimony. What do we learn about repentance and baptism based on these passages?

Leading Question: According to Acts 2:44, “All the believers were together and had everything in common.” The point is emphasized again in Acts 4:32, which says, “No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.” Would you like to be part of such a group?

1. The description of the early church in Acts 2:42-47 sounds rather foreign to many of us today.

What were the primary activities that the early church community engaged in, according to the text? What are the differences between that church and our church today?

What would be some of the benefits of belonging to such a group? Are there any drawbacks?

Would you like to be part of such a group? I’ve asked my students this question before, and it’s generally about a 60/40 split, with the 60% saying yes. On many occasions, students have described this communal approach as “communism” or “socialism”. Is this an accurate description?

Should church members today feel a responsibility to provide financial assistance to each other?

2. There is a repeated reference to miraculous powers being present in the early church. To what degree should we expect this today?

3. Acts 3 and 4 record one of the longest healing narratives in the entire Bible: the healing of a 40 year old man who was unable to walk.

The text says that Peter and John were going to the temple at the time of prayer. If these men were now Christians, why would they continue to worship at the Jewish temple? Why would they continue to orient their days around the Jewish times of prayer?

The man was healed “by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,” according to Peter in Acts 4:10. What does this mean? Is there power in the name of Jesus? Does this power “translate” into different languages, or should we attempt to pronounce the name of Jesus as it appears in Greek, or Aramaic, or Hebrew?

The text specifies that the man was placed at the temple gate every day. The apostles (and even Jesus) must have passed him by before. Why did the man have to wait so long for his healing?

The religious leaders were upset about this healing and they wanted to know who had given Peter and John authority to heal. If we look at the history of God’s actions, to what degree does God follow established hierarchies of religious authority?

The disciples announce Jesus as Savior, saying, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Does this mean someone must hear about Jesus and accept him in order to be saved? What about the salvation of those who have never heard of Jesus?

4. The story of Ananias and Sapphira is an example of a punitive miracle. What are the lessons for us from this story? Does God still sometimes step in to “miraculously” punish sinners?

5. In Acts 5, the Sanhedrin became so angry with the apostles that they wanted to kill them. Gamaliel tried to dissuade them, and was successful.

Who was Gamaliel?

Gamaliel said, “Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But, if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God” (Acts 5:38-39). Is this still good advice when we face theological threats to the church? When do we actively try to protect the church, and when should we just wait to see what happens?

GOOD WORD 2018.3
Lesson #4 – Study for July 28
Prepared by Paul Dybdahl, School of Theology, WWU

The First Church Leaders
Acts 6—8

Leading Question: Were there racial tensions in the early church?

1. In our previous lesson, we emphasized the close fellowship of the early church. But Acts reveals that this happy state of affairs didn't last. In Acts 6:1-7, we read about a dispute between two factions: Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews who were now followers of Jesus.

Is this controversy a sign that the believers weren't fully converted, or can converted people still carry prejudice against people who are culturally or racially different than themselves? If conversion doesn't remove all prejudice, what will? Are there practical steps that can be taken to decrease or remove our cultural biases?

What were the key actions the apostles took to resolve the conflict? What can we learn about resolving church conflict from them?

The seven men chosen were not given the title of "deacon," as is often supposed. The word deacon does appear multiple times in this account, however. This word is associated with Jesus, his disciples, as well as women. So, what does this word actually mean?

As was the case earlier in Acts, we see that the church functioned as a sort of "social security" system for believers. Does the church still have this responsibility?

2. Acts 6:8-7:60 provides an amazing account of Stephen, one of the leaders selected to deacon the church who is seized and brought before the Sanhedrin. He responds to his accusers with the longest speech in the book of Acts. Rather than calming his accusers, he stirs them up into a frenzy, and they kill him.

In Acts, we find a variety of responses to opposition. Sometimes, God's people flee the area. Sometimes, they stay. Sometimes they are diplomatic in their defense; sometimes they are more confrontational, as Stephen was here. (Stephen concludes by calling the Sanhedrin "stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears" who "always resist the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). So, how should we relate to false accusations? How do we know when to provide a soft answer to turn away wrath, and when to directly confront and even accuse our adversaries?

What was the essential message of Stephen's sermon? How does this message apply to us today?

Who did Stephen see as he died? Why was Jesus standing? Did Stephen die a horrible death, or was it glorious? (See Acts 7:54-55.)

In Acts 7:59-60, Stephen's dying words echo the words of Jesus on the cross. What is Luke, the author, trying to show by this?

Finally, Acts tells us that Saul was present at the killing of Stephen, and he approved of it. Reflect on the gruesome nature of death by stoning. What sort of person could, for theological reasons (Saul believed Stephen was a heretic) witness this brutality, and stand by, approving of it?

3. The death of Stephen sparked a time of great persecution against the church. Was this persecution destructive or beneficial (see Acts 8:1-4)?

4. The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is significant for a number of reasons.

What does his acceptance into the body of believers signify about differences of race?

In this account, the man's status as eunuch is repeatedly referenced. Does this story contain a message for us today, as we reflect on issues of gender identity in our society, or would that be stretching the story beyond its appropriate application?

GOOD WORD 2018.3

Lesson #5 – Study for August 4

Prepared by Paul Dybdahl, School of Theology, WWU

The Conversion of Paul

Acts 9, 26:9-11

Leading Question: Saul of Tarsus, who becomes known as Paul, is converted while on a mission to persecute believers in Jesus. But who was Saul? What do we know about his life before his conversion experience? And was it really a conversion?

1. In Acts 26:9-11, Saul describes himself prior to his experience with Jesus on the Damascus road.

What do we learn about him from this testimony? Based on the many letters that he wrote, what other relevant insights do we gain about this man? (The lesson quarterly provides some helpful information, and many other resources are readily available in print or online.)

According to Saul (who will be referred to as Paul from this point forward), his persecution of believers was spurred on by sincere conviction and religious zeal. Is religious zeal a dangerous thing? If we are convinced we are righteous and theologically correct, do we become dangerous? How can we be both confident in our beliefs and yet open to God's correction and instruction?

2. Carefully read Acts 9.

Why did God call Paul to go as a missionary to the Gentiles? Why not one of the other disciples who had actually been with Jesus during his earthly ministry? Was there something about Paul's background that better equipped him for ministry to Gentiles?

Paul persecuted the Lord's disciples. When Jesus appeared to Paul, he said, "Why do you persecute me?" Apparently, Jesus identifies himself with his disciples. How do you suppose Jesus feels today when we criticize fellow believers?

What are the parts of Paul's conversion story are especially meaningful to you?

Was the Damascus road experience really a conversion? Was Paul a believer in God beforehand? What was he converted from?

How should Paul's conversion serve as a model for conversion in general? Are most conversions dramatic and sudden, or are they more subtle and gradual?

After coming to faith in Jesus, Paul immediately began to share his faith in Damascus and continued to do so when he returned to Jerusalem (Acts 9:19-31). How successful were these early efforts? The text suggests that Paul may have been a bit strident. Is it possible for a person to be too zealous for Jesus? Can zeal actually close doors that would otherwise be opened?

Does witnessing for Jesus always involve suffering?

GOOD WORD 2018.3
Lesson #6 – Study for August 11
Prepared by Paul Dybdahl, School of Theology, WWU

The Ministry of Peter
Acts 9:32—12:18

Leading Question: Peter saw a vision of all sorts of animals being let down to earth in a large sheet. A voice said, "Kill, and eat." Was this a vision about dietary issues, or something else?

1. In Acts, we find a number of occasions when the followers of Jesus echo his words or actions. Two of these instances are in Acts 9:32-43, when Peter heals Aeneas and raises Tabitha from the dead. Later in Acts, Paul also echoes the actions of Jesus.

Why do you think Luke draws these parallels? Does this indicate that the same power of Jesus is available for followers of Jesus today? If so, what are the implications?

2. Peter's resurrection of Tabitha involves privacy, prayer, and then a word of instruction to the dead woman, "Tabitha, get up."

Is this a pattern to be followed today? Are people still raised from the dead today?

3. Acts 10 begins an extended narrative in which a Roman centurion, Cornelius, and his household receive the Holy Spirit and are baptized by Peter.

Does God prepare both Peter and Cornelius for this encounter?

Is the vision Peter receives about food, or about something else?

It is easy to see the prejudices of others. For example, today we could see that Peter should not have been prejudiced against Cornelius. It is more difficult, however, to recognize our own prejudices. Who are the people that we are most prejudiced against today? Is it possible that some of them may be "God fearers" and good, even devout people in their own right?

Peter confesses that he had finally come to realize that "God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). What does this mean?

We often emphasize the sacrificial death of Jesus as the salvific event that must be proclaimed. Notice carefully Peter's message to the household of Cornelius. What is the event from the Jesus story that Peter emphasizes? What lesson does that hold for us?

Cornelius and his household are baptized. It seems to be a corporate commitment. Is this acceptable today, or must each person make his or her own decision, without peer pressure from someone else?

4. In Acts 11, Peter is criticized by circumcised believers, not because uncircumcised Cornelius was baptized, but because Peter accepted hospitality and table fellowship from him (Acts 11:1-3)!

Which is the greater challenge for us: to believe that God has accepted a foreigner (or anyone who is distastefully different from us) into his family, or to actually befriend such people and treat them as social equals?

5. Luke, the author of Acts, takes a few moments to provide his readers with an update on the progress of the gospel in Antioch. Acts 11:26 says that the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. Prior to this, they were called by a variety of terms such as disciples, believers, followers of the Way, even saints!

How important is the name that we are called by others? What is the danger of being given a specific religious designation? What is the benefit?

How was the term "Christian" first understood by those in the ancient world?

6. In Acts 12:1-19, we read that James was killed by the sword. He was one of Jesus' closest disciples, yet was the first of the twelve to be martyred. His death pleased the Jews, so Herod had Peter imprisoned, with the intention of executing him as well. The night before his trial, Peter is dramatically rescued from prison.

How are we to understand all this? James is killed. Peter is delivered. Does God protect his own? Can we trust God to protect us when we commit our lives to him?

GOOD WORD 2018.3
Lesson #7 – Study for August 18
Prepared by Paul Dybdahl, School of Theology, WWU

Paul's First Missionary Journey
Acts 13—14:26

Leading Question: All three of Paul's so-called "missionary journeys" started in Antioch. Why were the believers in this city so supportive of these missionary endeavors?

1. According to Acts 13, the impetus for Paul's first missionary journey came from the Holy Spirit during a corporate time of worship and fasting.

Is there still value in corporate fasting? If so, why don't we participate in it more often?

In this chapter, we again see the body of believers laying their hands on individuals as they begin a new ministry or task (Acts 6:6, 13:3). Is this "laying on of hands" an official administrative action of some sort? Is this a case of ordination?

Paul and Barnabas were sent off on a journey that involved about 1,500 miles of travel. What were the key locations and events that took place on this journey? What was travel like at this time in history?

We ought to notice that Cyprus was the first stop on the journey. Barnabas, Paul's traveling companion, was from Cyprus. What are the advantages of "going to one's own" with the gospel? What are the disadvantages?

2. While on the island of Cyprus, we find that Paul and Barnabas first preached in a Jewish synagogue before they turned to the Gentiles.

Why did they use this strategy, both here and in most places where they visited?

On Cyprus, we find a striking difference in the way people received their message. Sergius Paulus, the local Roman governor, responds positively to the message, while the Jewish sorcerer, Bar-Jesus (also known as Elymas) opposes them. The lesson quarterly notes that sometimes, those of other religions are more open to the Advent message compared to fellow Christians. Is this the case? If so, why?

3. In Acts 13:13-52, the story shifts from Cyprus to Pisidian Antioch. As the lesson quarterly points out, there are two changes that we should note. First, the text begins to refer consistently to Saul by another name, Paul. (This change was first introduced in Acts 12:9). Second, John Mark, who was traveling with Paul and Barnabas as their "helper", leaves them and returns to Jerusalem. What is the significance of each of these events?

4. Paul's sermon to the synagogue is recorded in Acts 13:15-43. Notice that Paul gives God the credit for all that happens. Over and over again in his message, he emphasizes the initiative of God. In just verses 17-19, Paul reminds his audience that God chose, God made, God led, God overthrew, and God gave.

To what degree does God take the initiative in history? Does he control what happens? Should he receive all the credit for the good, but none of the blame for the bad?

Paul concludes by stating that forgiveness and justification are only available through Jesus, and not "from the law of Moses" (vs 39). How would this have sounded to Jewish ears? What does it mean for us?

5. At Iconium (Acts 14:1-7) those opposed to Paul and Barnabas plot to stone them. They fled, however, to Lystra and Derbe.

Why? Should we flee from an area if we face hardship and danger? Do we keep silent in order to preserve our lives, or do we speak out, even in the face of persecution, as John the Baptist did?

Is there a difference between the "fleeing" of John Mark to Jerusalem and the "fleeing" of Paul and Barnabas a short while later?

6. In Lystra and Derbe, the healing of a crippled man led the local people to conclude that Paul and Barnabas were the gods Zeus and Hermes, in human form. Paul clarifies that this is not the case, but then makes a declaration that is somewhat contrary to the modern Christian view. In Christian witnessing, it is common to assert that sin separates us from God and keeps us from experiencing true joy. Yet, Paul tells the pagans that God had shown kindness to them and had provided them with food. Additionally, Paul proclaimed to the people that it was God who "fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:17).

Is this the case? Can a worshipper of Zeus or Hermes have a heart full of God-given joy, even though they do not know or worship the true God? If so, what are the implications of this? Should our evangelistic message focus on God as distant, or God as near?

GOOD WORD 2018.3
Lesson #8 – Study for August 25
Prepared by Paul Dybdahl, School of Theology, WWU

The Jerusalem Council
Acts 15

Leading Question: At the end of their missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas return to the church that sent them in Antioch. When they give their mission report, not everyone is happy. Why?

1. Acts 15 is a critical chapter. The church doesn't all agree on the methods of Paul and Barnabas. The conversion of Gentiles is both good and bad news for many Jews. They are, of course, thankful that God was reaching Gentile hearts, but they were concerned that Paul and Barnabas had watered down the lifestyle changes necessary for a true disciple of Jesus. In particular, there seemed to be a concern over those issues that would have impacted social interaction and fellowship between the two groups. Issues such as circumcision and ceremonial law as it related to table fellowship loomed large (Acts 15:1-5). For example, some felt circumcision was absolutely necessary. Others didn't. How would these issues that threatened the unity of the church be dealt with?

As is always the case, success in cross-cultural mission brings a mixture of joy and concern for the home church. There is joy that others have accepted the message, but concern, because the way the Christian life is lived will always look different in different cultures.

Drawing from Acts 15, what are the lessons we can learn about how to deal with these sorts of conflicts? (I think this question is the central question of this chapter. It deserves long and careful discussion.)

What must a person do in order to be saved? This is a question that is dealt with on several occasions in Luke's writings. We should note that the answers that are given in the text aren't identical. What should we learn from this? Is there a core set of beliefs and a core set of behaviors that are necessary, regardless of one's culture?

Circumcision seems to be a fundamental requirement in the Bible. In fact, according to Exodus 12:43-49, it was required of slaves and foreigners who wanted to experience the covenant blessings of God's people. How could this now be changed, and foreigners no longer be required to be circumcised? What does this say about the other explicit commands of the Bible if we can set this aside to make it easier for those who are turning to God?

In Acts 15, there is the explicit aim of making it easier for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Is this still a helpful guide? Should the way of salvation be broad and easily accessible, or does God require us to sacrifice everything to follow him?

Ultimately, what were the four requirements that were required of the Gentiles who were coming to faith in Jesus? Are these requirements still in effect? What surprises you about this list?

2. In recent times, churches who are facing internal conflict over issues of policy and global practice have turned to Acts 15 for guidance. Clearly, the apostles wanted unity.

If we want unity, what is the main message we can learn from Acts 15?

3. Some time ago, I was asked to read Acts 15 and reflect on how it ought to inform the way we deal with the diversity of practices within a global church. Should diverse practices be administratively ended, so the church can be unified? Are those advocating for diversity of practice troublemakers who are fracturing the unity of the Body of Christ? Here are a few paragraphs which address some of these issues. I include this brief commentary for your reflection.

First, the Jerusalem Council was not about establishing uniform practice or giving approval to limited variations, but was specifically about legitimizing diversity of practice which was already taking place. The Jerusalem Council clarified that the church does not need to maintain uniform practice across its territory to remain unified. In different geographic and cultural settings, believers could live out their commitment to Christ in different ways. This was already happening, and the Council affirmed that this was indeed appropriate. The challenge that precipitated the Council was not this diversity among the Gentile believers, but the demand for a uniform practice from Jewish Christians who expected circumcision of all believers. In their decision, the apostles noted how this Jewish group had disturbed and troubled the church (Acts 15:24). Ironically, it was the group clamoring for unity that was actually fracturing unity.

Second, the Acts 15 Council arrived at their decision as a result of the testimony of those who had seen God's Spirit at work among the Gentiles, the very group accused of being "out of compliance" with the rest of the Church. According to the "minutes" of the meeting recorded in Acts, missionary stories told by Peter, Paul and Barnabas carried the day. By the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, God had already shown his acceptance of the Gentiles. Unity was based on this

gracious act of God. In short, the reports of God's inclusivity demanded a corresponding move toward inclusivity from the Church. As Peter said, "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:8-9). Who would dare to stand against what the Holy Spirit had done?

Third, the decision of the Jerusalem Council was not quoted nor treated as authoritative policy to arbitrate disagreements moving forward. Just a few years later, Paul dealt with a controversy over idol meat among the believers in Corinth. This was precisely the issue that the Jerusalem Council had settled. There was a clear policy which answered the question by saying that believers must not eat food offered to idols. But Paul never mentions the decision made in Jerusalem! Why? Guided by the Holy Spirit, he must have realized that doing so would, in fact, fracture the very unity that the Jerusalem Council sought to preserve. In short, quoting policy to settle disagreements could never create the kind of spiritual unity the New Testament Church desired.

GOOD WORD 2018.3
Lesson #9 – Study for September 1
Prepared by Paul Dybdahl, School of Theology, WWU

The Second Missionary Journey
Acts 15:36—18:10

Leading Question: Can good, Christian people disagree so strongly that they can no longer work together?

1. Some time after their return from their first missionary journey, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they retrace their steps and visit the various churches they had established (Acts 15:36-41). Barnabas wanted to bring his cousin John Mark along. Paul, however, remembering that John Mark had "deserted them" on the first missionary journey, did not think this was a wise decision. The disagreement between these two church leaders was so sharp that they parted company.

Are disagreements between Christians a sign of spiritual immaturity?

Should Paul and Barnabas have been able to work out their differences, or are some differences irreconcilable?

Who do you side with in the disagreement? Why?

We should note that Barnabas, who was one of the first to forgive Paul and welcome him into fellowship despite his violent past, is also the one most willing to forgive John Mark and give him a second chance! Ironically, Paul, who needed that grace from Barnabas, now faults him for

extending it to someone else! Do we sometimes behave the same way with God? Do we thank him for his grace to us, but fail to extend that same grace to others?

What was the result of this disagreement? Did Barnabas or Paul try to silence the other? Did they threaten to rescind the other's credentials?

2. In Acts 16:1-5, we read that Paul had Timothy circumcised.

According to the Jerusalem Council, circumcision wasn't necessary. So, why did Paul require this of young Timothy? What would be a contemporary application of the principle Paul is using here?

3. Paul and his new traveling companion, Silas, are kept from entering Bithynia to share the gospel. The one who kept them from this gospel proclamation was none other than the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 15:7).

Are there some areas where we should not share the gospel? If so, why? How can we know the places we ought to go? What happens if we share in an area where the Spirit of Jesus does not call us to share?

4. In Philippi, Paul and Silas have rather interesting interactions with Lydia, a slave girl, and a jailer (Acts 16:11-40).

Based on the text of Acts 16, what sort of woman was Lydia? Note the subtle humor of the narrative: Paul and Silas are called, in vision, by a man of Macedonia. However, when they arrive in the region of Macedonia, the first person to welcome them and receive their message was . . . not a man, but a woman.

A second woman who figures prominently in the narrative is a young slave who "had a spirit by which she predicted the future" (Acts 16:16). What she said was true, so why did Paul rebuke her so harshly? Can we tell the truth in such a way that it hurts the cause of God?

Finally, when Paul and Silas are imprisoned, they come in contact with the jailer. How many baptismal studies did this pagan man receive before his baptism? Was his baptism too quick? Should Paul have waited until he had received more complete instruction? How about today? Are baptismal candidates typically over prepared or under prepared?

Are you comfortable with Paul's answer to the jailer's question about salvation? Is it really the case that all we need to do is to "Believe in the Lord Jesus" and we, along with all our extended family ("household" in the text) will be saved? Is this too easy?

5. In Acts 17, Paul speaks to Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. In his sermon, he quotes from various pagan writings. Verse 28 includes a quote from Epimenides (approximately 600 BC) and Cleanthes in his Hymn to Zeus!

Should evangelists today still do such things? Would it be acceptable, for example, to quote from the sacred literature of another religion? Is it dangerous to even read such non-Christian sources?

6. Paul then moved on to Corinth, where he stayed for about one and a half years (Acts 18:1-11). While he must have been encouraged by the friendship of Priscilla and Aquilla, he also received direct encouragement from the Lord.

How does God encourage you when you are feeling down? Does God always encourage, or is he sometimes silent in the face of our discouragement? If so, why?

GOOD WORD 2018.3
Lesson #10 – Study for September 8
Prepared by Paul Dybdahl, School of Theology, WWU

The Third Missionary Journey
Acts 18—20

Leading Question: The Christian church speaks quite a bit about baptism. Acts takes that word “baptism” and forces us to use the plural “baptisms”. So, how many types of baptism are there in Acts?

1. These chapters in Acts record the events surrounding Paul’s third missionary journey. The geographic focus of this journey is Ephesus, where Paul spends about three and a half years.

What would life in Ephesus have been like at this time in history?

2. While in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquilla interact with Apollos, who “knew only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:25). Later, Paul meets “some disciples” (Acts 19:1-7) who had received “John’s baptism” but hadn’t even heard that there was a Holy Spirit! Paul baptized them “into the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:5). Then, he placed his hands on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

So, back to the leading question! How many types of baptism are there in the book of Acts? Can they be combined into one?

What does each one signify?

When they are performed separately, do they always come in the same order? (Hint: the answer is no!) What is the lesson for us today from all this?

It seems that, on multiple occasions in Acts, the Holy Spirit comes upon a person in connection with the laying on of hands. Have you received the Holy Spirit? Have you ever had “hands laid on you” in this spiritual sense? Should we practice this more often in our church?

3. Paul’s preaching in Ephesus was buttressed by miracles of healing.

Why does it seem that we hear about miracles in other parts of the world, but so seldom in North America? Is that a fair characterization?

Acts 19:11 refers to “extraordinary miracles.” What would be the difference between ordinary and extraordinary miracles?

According to Acts 19:12, even material that had touched Paul could be used to bring healing to others. Are you comfortable with this? Does this seem too much like a magic show?

While in Ephesus there is also the incredible story of seven sons of Sceva, the Jewish chief priest, who were apparently exorcizing demons “in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches” (19:13). What lessons should we learn from this story? Is demonic harassment an issue in our church today? Who would we go to if we needed deliverance from demons?

4. After leaving Ephesus, Acts records Paul’s journey through Macedonian and Greece. In Troas, Paul preaches Eutychus into such a deep sleep that he falls from a window and dies. Reread the story carefully, and note the elements of humor that Luke, the author, includes. Also, based on Luke’s account, would you say that Paul was an interesting speaker?

GOOD WORD 2018.3

Lesson #11 – Study for September 15

Prepared by Paul Dybdahl, School of Theology, WWU

Arrest in Jerusalem

Acts 21—23:30

Leading Question: Are religious beliefs personal and private, or are there some religious differences that are worth arguing—even fighting—about?

1. Acts 21 begins with a recitation of the stages in Paul’s journey to Jerusalem. He is warned by fellow believers, and by the prophet Agabus, that to continue to Jerusalem would lead to his arrest. Paul continues on, saying that he is willing to be bound and even to die “for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13).

Should Paul have continued on despite these warnings? If so, then what was the purpose of the Holy Spirit speaking through Agabus to warn Paul? What good is a prophet if the audience doesn’t listen?

In what ways does Paul’s journey to Jerusalem parallel Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem? Did both men know what awaited them? Did both men go willingly? Were they treated similarly when they arrived?

2. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Paul faced false accusations that he had been teaching people to forsake Moses. At the urging of believers sympathetic to him, Paul tried to show otherwise by sponsoring the Nazirite vow for four other men. This act was intended to demonstrate Paul’s loyalty to Moses and Jewish tradition (Acts 21:20-26).

Did Paul’s efforts work?

According to the Lesson Quarterly, Paul's actions in sponsoring the vow were a mistake. The Quarterly asserts, "It was a compromise, as it signified his endorsement of the legalistic motives behind the recommendation." Then, there is a quote from Ellen White's Acts of the Apostles which says that Paul "was not authorized by God to concede as much as they asked" (pg 405). How do you feel about this assessment? Did Paul do something wrong? Was he trying to appease the "liberals" of his day or the "conservatives"?

When someone is suspicious of our orthodoxy, is there any way of convincing them otherwise? Do critics really want us to change, or does their sense of joy come from the criticizing itself?

3. Paul is falsely accused, and soon, there was a riot in the temple as others joined in. In Acts 21:37-22:21, we read Paul's response to the mob. It is strange that he doesn't directly address the accusations that were raised against him. Instead, he told his life story.

Can you think of occasions when a rumor grows, and soon, there is an online "mob" of people, eager to defend the faith, who join in attacking someone they don't know based on accusations they haven't confirmed? How can a follower of Jesus keep from joining such online riots?

How much weight should we put in the fruit of someone's life? Which is more important—their religious beliefs, or a life that demonstrates the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control)? In other words, should a person's virtuous life of service carry any weight in a theological controversy?

4. The next day, Paul is brought before the Sanhedrin. His behavior is rather unorthodox. He calls the high priest a "whitewashed wall," then says that he didn't know he was the high priest. Next, he announces that he is on trial because of his belief in the resurrection. He does this strategically, because this was a theological difference that divided Pharisees and Sadducees. Sure enough, the Sanhedrin is thrown into chaos as the two factions begin to argue (Acts 23:6-11).

What does all this suggest about Paul's personality?

Did Paul really not know who the high priest was, or was he trying to make some other point?

Are there any religious issues that are worth arguing about? Are there any beliefs that are so dangerous that we would contemplate imprisoning the one who professes those beliefs?

5. By the end of Acts 23, Paul, his life still under threat by his religious opponents, is transferred under Roman guard to Caesarea.

Are there times when civil authorities need to step in to resolve religious conflict? How might God use the military power of the state to provide protection for his people?

GOOD WORD 2018.3
Lesson #12 – Study for September 22
Prepared by Paul Dybdahl, School of Theology, WWU

Confinement in Caesarea
Acts 24—26

Leading Question: Have you ever had to testify on your own behalf in a court of law? What was that like for you?

1. Following Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, he was transferred to Caesarea, where he was held for about two years. While there, he was questioned by the Roman governors Felix and Festus, and also King Agrippa II.

Paul Before Felix (Acts 24:1-17)

Notice the three charges that are brought against Paul. Are any of them accurate charges?

In his defense, Paul refers to himself as "a follower of the Way" rather than as a Christian, even though the term "Christian" was in use at that time. Why do you suppose he does this? What does this title "follower of the Way" suggest about the early believers? How is being a "follower of the Way" different than "being a Christian" or "being a member" of the Seventh-day Adventist church?

In verse 25, we read that Felix became afraid as Paul talked. What was he afraid of? How did he respond to his fear? Do we often respond to fear in the same way?

Paul Before Festus (Acts 25:1-12)

Although two years had passed and a new Roman governor, Festus, had come to power, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had clearly not forgotten about Paul. What is the approximate shelf-life of hatred? Does jealousy, bitterness, and hatred diminish or grow over time?

Paul seems to have concluded that he would never receive a fair trial in Caesarea or Jerusalem, so he appeals directly to Caesar. Are there times when a believer ought to appeal to a secular

power for protection? Might we even go to court against a fellow believer who is perhaps harassing us?

Paul Before Festus and Agrippa (Acts 25:13—26:32)

Once again in his trials, Paul makes it clear that the fact of Jesus' resurrection is crucial. He believes that he is on trial because of this very conviction.

What do we know about Agrippa and his sister Bernice? What difference does this background make in the trial narrative we are reading?

As he had done before the Sanhedrin, Paul defends himself before Agrippa by telling his story. He doesn't argue over points of law, but rather, testifies as to what God has done in his life. If we were brought before a court of law and questioned about our faith, what story would we have to tell?

One of my favorite lines in Acts is what Paul says to Agrippa after he has told him of Jesus' appearance on the road to Damascus. Paul says, "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven" (Acts 26:19). What about us? Has God called us to a specific task? How have we responded? Have we become side-tracked? Are we being "obedient to the vision" that God has given to us?

Festus responds to Paul's story by accusing him of being insane (Acts 26:24). Are there things that we believe that outsiders would consider insane? Should we share these beliefs openly, or keep them from those who would not understand?

2. At the conclusion of these trials, Agrippa declares that Paul could have been set free if he hadn't already appealed to Caesar.

So, had Paul made a mistake? What would have happened if he had indeed been set free?

3. Both Jesus and Paul went to Jerusalem, despite the fact that they knew they would be arrested there. Both are beaten, and appear before the Sanhedrin and then other Roman authorities.

What are the other similarities and differences between their stories?

Leading Question: Have you ever had someone who is a good person, but a bad traveling companion? What sort of a traveling partner would Paul have been?

1. Paul had always wanted to go to Rome. Now, he gets his chance, but it isn't quite the journey he had hoped for. Luke, the author of Acts, travels with Paul. This helps to explain the many eyewitness details that are shared in these last two chapters of Acts.

What do you suppose it would have been like to travel with Paul? Would Luke have answered this question in the same way as Barnabas? Do you suppose Paul mellowed with age, or did he become even more set in his opinions?

Consistently throughout Luke and Acts, Roman centurions are depicted as men of character. Are there people of virtue and integrity that are not part of our faith community?

Over and over again in Paul's experience, he is rescued from death. Yet, we know that many other followers of Jesus were not spared. Is this just a matter of chance? Does God protect truly important people that are faithful to him, or is there some other rationale God uses when deciding whether or not to intervene?

2. Once again, we must note the parallels between the experiences of Jesus and Paul. While on the ship, Paul "took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat" (Acts 27:35). Careful readers will note multiple parallels with the feeding of the 5,000, and also with the Last Supper.

Why would Luke present the story in such a way that these parallels are highlighted?

The Last Supper was part of a Jewish festival, shared between Jesus and 12 Jewish followers in an upper room. Here, on the upper deck of a heaving ship, Paul invites all 275 fellow travelers, from all different walks of life and all different religious backgrounds, to take and to eat. Now, the bread is given to all. In what ways does this act communicate the basic message of Acts as a whole?

3. Upon his arrival in Rome, Paul is met by fellow Jews, who listen to his message. Some were convinced, but others “would not believe” (Acts 28:24).

Is belief a choice? Is there a difference between a sincere person who wants to believe but cannot, and someone who could believe but chooses not to?

4. Acts concludes with Paul in Rome, guarded by a Roman soldier, boldly preaching “the kingdom of God” and teaching “about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31).

Is this conclusion surprising in any way?

5. What has been your favorite insight from your study of Acts this quarter? What are the main lessons we should learn from this book? In what ways can Paul’s story become our story?