

Expounding Narrative: Acts 15:1-16:5

Locating our text on the wider map of scripture

When considering our interpretation and application of any scriptural text, it is helpful to locate the text on the wider map of scripture. Acts is the second part of a two part work, commonly attributed to Luke (cf. Colossians 4:14) who, as a doctor, would have been well-educated and capable of writing the polished Greek of the New Testament text.

Luke's gospel gives an orderly account of the ministry of Jesus and Acts continues by giving an orderly account of the spread and growth of the New Testament church. Both Luke (Luke 1:5; 2:1-2; 3:1-2; 23:1-25) and Acts (Acts 11:28; 12:1-23; 18:2; 18:12-17; 24:1-25:12; 25:13-26:32) are firmly rooted in a historical context. An important theme in Luke is that Jesus is the 'Saviour of the World' and not only a Messiah for Jews. In his Gospel, Luke carefully selects narrative and speeches that are important to his theme, as he gives an account of 'all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach' (Acts 1:1). The traditional title 'Acts of the Apostles' (*Praxeis Apostolon*) was first used in the second century by Irenaeus. After Jesus ascended into glory, Luke proceeds to give an account of what Jesus *continued* to do and to teach, through his church. Jesus told his disciples, 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

In Acts, Luke arranges his material into six sections and concludes each section with a progress report or summarising statement. After an account of *The beginning of the Christian mission* (1:1-2:41), Luke continues the first half of Acts with an account of *The proclamation of the gospel to the Jewish world* (2:42-12:24), dividing this into three sections, (1) The earliest days of the church at Jerusalem (2:42-6:7); (2) Critical events in the lives of three important figures (6:8-9:31) and (3) The advances of the gospel in Palestine-Syria (9:32-12:24). In the second half of Acts, Luke gives an account of *The proclamation of the gospel to the Gentile world* (12:25-28:31), dividing this into three sections, (1) The first missionary journey and the Jerusalem Council (12:25-16:5); (2) The widening Christian outreach, two missionary journeys (16:6-19:20) and (3) From Jerusalem to Rome (19:21-28:31).

Speeches and narrative in Acts

Although speeches form a considerable part of Acts, even for the speeches the historical narrative provides the context. However, there are also passages that are wholly historical narrative and include very little or no direct speech. The question that must be asked of the narrative in Acts is whether what the apostles do and things that happen should be regarded as normative for the church and Christian practice today. As with any passage of scripture, our work begins with the faithful study of the specific passage but any interpretation or application that we give must be in harmony with the rest of scripture. If any element of the narrative is of particular importance, it is unlikely that it is only mentioned in that one passage. A broad view of the scriptures (and biblical theology) will not allow us to conclude that something must always happen in the church today (be normative) just because it happened in particular episodes of the history of the New Testament church. A good practical rule, therefore, is that it is better to work from the general sweep of scriptural teaching to try and understand the specific passage than to make wide generalisations from a specific passage.

In this third and final study on interpreting the narrative of Acts we are looking at a critical passage in Acts, which recounts the expansion of the preaching of the apostles to Gentiles and the decision of the Jerusalem council as to whether Gentiles must become Jews in order to become fully Christian.

Acts 15:1-16:5

As with the passages that we considered in previous weeks we must look at *the role of Luke's writings in the wider canon of Holy Scripture and the place of the passage in the overall structure of Acts*. Then it is time to consider the specific section in which the passage falls (the summarising verse). From the work we have done on the overall structure of Acts, we know that Luke has ordered this part of his writing into six sections, each with a concluding statement. This passage (Acts 15:1-16:5) comes in the second half of Acts, *The proclamation of the gospel to the Gentile world (12:25-28:31)*, and is the first of the three sections and concerns the first missionary journey and the Jerusalem Council (12:25-16:5). Luke states clearly what this section is about in his summarising verse, 'so the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers' (Acts 16:5).

The key issue in the passage is whether it will be a requirement for Gentile Christians to be admitted into Judaism as well. The divide between Jews and Gentiles was one of the profound divisions in the ancient world. At Syrian Antioch, some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem had been preaching that circumcision was essential to salvation. It appears that Christians had known persecution from Jews for preaching to the Gentiles at all (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16) but some Jewish Christians (sometimes called 'Judaizers') thought they could diminish Jewish opposition by showing that Gentiles were being circumcised and, therefore, really being enlisted to the Jewish rather than the Gentile cause (Galatians 6:12-13). However, the inherent danger in this approach was teaching that it was necessary to become a Jew (and be circumcised and initiated into the Law) in order to be a Christian. The matter was referred to the Jerusalem Council. The theological necessity of circumcision and observance of the Jewish law for salvation was rejected but there was also a second consideration. This had to do with the practical necessity of Gentile Christians abstaining from certain practices for the sake of Jewish-Gentile fellowship within the church and for the sake of the Jewish Christian mission throughout the Diaspora. James's advice was that a letter be written to the Gentile Christians. This letter should request them to abstain "from food polluted by idols", "from sexual immorality" (probably a reference to marriage in the prohibited degrees of relationship), "from the meat of strangled animals" and "from blood" (i.e. "from eating blood"). These last four points should be seen as concessions to others for the sake of harmony within the church, rather than divine ordinances for acceptance before God. The thinking behind this was that Jewish communities are to be found in every city and their scruples are to be respected by Gentile believers (Acts 15:21).

Important questions to bear in mind when dealing with the passage

Last time, I introduced a list of 20 questions that I had devised to sharpen our thinking about narrative passages in Acts. In considering these, we must not forget to place Acts in the total canon of scriptural teaching but remember the particular emphases of Luke's writings. The first

17 questions are focused on the text and the remaining three questions help us review our exegesis (the actual study of the text) and move this on into exposition (exploring the meaning and application for today). One of the key questions is whether or not the narrative can be considered normative for the church and for Christians today. Before we consider it normative, there should be considerable other biblical teaching on this point that will inform our interpretation and application.

- 1 Do I learn anything about the New Testament church in action?
- 2 What is the role of the apostles in this passage?
- 3 Does it mention evangelism, Bible study, or Christians living in a particular local culture?
- 4 Are there historical details (e.g. place names, well-known people)?
- 5 Where does the passage fall in the overall structure of Acts (mission to Jews or Gentiles)?
- 6 Does this passage show God acting through the apostolic ministry?
- 7 Does it reveal anything about the meaning and implications of Jesus' death and resurrection?
- 8 Does it reveal anything about the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit?
- 9 Do we learn anything about challenges and difficulties the apostles faced?
- 10 Do we learn anything about the nature of the apostles' relationship with each other?
- 11 Is there anything here about the church's proclamation of salvation and the Kingdom of God?
- 12 Is there anything to note about Christian worship?
- 13 In what specific section does the passage fall?
- 14 What is the summarising verse for that section?
- 15 How does this passage relate to what comes before and what comes after it?
- 16 Is this narrative normative?
- 17 Is there a speech and if so what is its context and main points?
- 18 What are the main points of this passage and is there a logical progression between them?
- 19 Can I present these in a listener-friendly, lively and relevant way?
- 20 What is my overall interpretation and is it in harmony with the rest of scripture?

1 Do I learn anything about the New Testament church in action?

The New Testament church had come to a cross-roads where the vital question has arisen, "Does a believer have to be initiated into Judaism in order to be a true Christian?" To be initiated into Judaism male converts would have to be circumcised and all converts would be required to obey the law of Moses. To answer this question, the elders and congregation of the church met and gave a clear answer – that circumcision was unnecessary but Jewish scruples should be respected.

2 What is the role of the apostles in this passage?

Paul and Barnabas, as guardians of the apostolic message, were brought into sharp dispute and debate with the men who later were adjudged false teachers. The apostles were prepared to consult with other apostles and elders and met with them to consider this question. When they had made a decision it was binding on the whole church.

3 Does it mention evangelism, Bible study, or Christians living in a particular local culture?

The whole narrative concerns a question that has arisen because of successful evangelism in a Gentile culture. The apostles told the good news of Gentile conversion to the brothers in Phoenicia and Samaria and this gladdened the hearts of those who heard.

4 Are there historical details (e.g. place names, well-known people)?

Several place names are mentioned – Judea, Antioch, Phoenicia, Samaria, Jerusalem, Syria and Cilicia. The apostles and other Christian leaders are mentioned (Paul, Barnabas, Peter, Judas (Barsabbas), Silas) but no secular historical figures are included in this passage.

5 Where does the passage fall in the overall structure of Acts (mission to Jews or Gentiles)?

It comes into the section concerning the mission to Gentiles.

6 Does this passage show God acting through the apostolic ministry?

Yes, first through Gentile conversions and then through the consideration that the apostles had to give to the question of circumcision. Peter gave a word of testimony (“Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe”, Acts 15:7). The apostles were also responsible for dealing with the consequences of unauthorised and erroneous teaching.

7 Does it reveal anything about the meaning and implications of Jesus’ death and resurrection?

It mentions the grace of the Lord Jesus as being the means of salvation for both Jew and Gentile but does not mention the Lord’s death and resurrection in specific terms (Acts 15:11).

8 Does it reveal anything about the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit?

Yes because it records, ‘God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them (Gentiles) by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us (Jews). He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith’ (Acts 15:8-9).

9 Do we learn anything about challenges and difficulties the apostles faced?

The apostles faced false teaching and internal strife as a consequence of it. They needed to guide the church from being an exclusive movement (only of Jews) to an inclusive one (Jews and Gentiles).

10 Do we learn anything about the nature of the apostles’ relationship with each other?

They were able to conduct themselves with good grace when they disagreed. ‘The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them’ (Acts 15:12). After listening to one another they were able to come to one mind, based on the revelation of God’s will, for which they searched the scriptures. James quoted from the scriptures about David’s fallen tent and a rebuilding that included Gentiles (Amos 9:11, Isaiah 45:21).

11 Is there anything here about the church’s proclamation of salvation and the Kingdom of God?

Yes, the good news is for Jews and Gentiles. Up until this point converts had come from Jews, proselytes and God-fearers. In any event, they decided that their proclamation should not make it difficult for people (in this case Gentiles) to turn to God.

12 Is there anything to note about Christian worship?

If v. 21 refers to Christian worship, rather than specifically synagogue worship, importance is given to reading the scriptures and preaching.

13 In what specific section does the passage fall?

The first missionary journey and the Jerusalem Council (12:25-16:5).

14 What is the summarising verse for that section?

The summarising verse needs supplementing by the preceding verse to give the full impact of the progress report. ‘As they travelled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers’ (Acts 16:4, 5).

15 How does this passage relate to what comes before and what comes after it?

The section before is an account of the first missionary journey and the arrival of the apostles at Antioch where the dispute breaks out. The passage afterwards shows the widening of the Christian outreach among the Gentiles.

16 Is this narrative normative?

The general theological point – the welcome of God to Gentile believers without the necessity of circumcision is an important theme in the New Testament (Galatians is a letter that deals with this point, see Galatians 2:12-13). Abstinence from food sacrificed to idols seems to be a ‘weaker brother’ issue (1 Corinthians 8:1-13). While dietary regulations, prohibitions about eating blood or the meat of strangled animals also seem to come from a concern for ‘weaker brothers’. However, sexual immorality is never condoned in the New Testament and Christians who thought that their freedom in Christ equated to sexual licence were excluded from the church (1 Corinthians 5:1-13)

17 Is there a speech and if so what is its context and main points?

There are two speeches. Their context is the Jerusalem Council. Peter gives an account of his experience and James shows how Peter’s experience is consistent with the prophecy of scripture.

18 What are the main points of this passage and is there a logical progression between them?

The immediate occasion for the Jerusalem Council was the visit to Syrian Antioch of some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem and their teaching that circumcision was essential to salvation. The Jerusalem Council agreed that circumcision was not essential to salvation but added four points that would enable Gentile and Jewish Christians to have harmonious fellowship. Later Paul circumcised Timothy, not because it was necessary for his salvation, but because it would make him more useful in his service among the Jews (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). The overall conclusion is that salvation is by grace through faith and no other requirement should be added whether these are good works, generous gifts or baptism (of infants or believers). It is important to contend for the truth and to oppose false teaching but it is also important to be sensitive to the scruples of others.

19 Can I present these in a listener-friendly, lively and relevant way?

As a preacher, I preached a couple of years ago on, ‘We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are’ (Acts 15:11) <http://www.ridgewaymethodist.org.uk/sermons.html> and confronted what I call the ‘Jesus and’ heresy. It is a principle of faith. The Gentiles believed in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour but the Judaizers told them they needed something else, ‘Jesus and circumcision’. Today, I don’t know people who teach ‘Jesus and circumcision’ for salvation (though no doubt they exist) but I do know people that teach ‘Jesus and baptism by immersion’, ‘Jesus and charismatic gifts’, ‘Jesus and good works’, or ‘Jesus and the nonconformist conscience (no drinking, smoking, gambling)’. The danger is that some people teach these things hardly knowing that is what they are teaching. The principle of faith is that Jews are no longer primarily Jews and Gentiles are no longer primarily Gentiles but they are Christians. The principle of faith was established, ‘In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek’ (Galatians 3:28). The principle of the truth is that Jews and Gentiles are made one in Christ but now that has to be put into practice. So, we move from the principle of faith to the practice of faith. Jews would not have eaten food that had been offered in pagan sacrifice, or the meat of strangled animals or anything with animal blood in it. It would be better to avoid all these things. It is on the principle of sensitivity to others that Paul decided that, as Timothy was born of a Jewish mother, if he were to be an effective witness, he should be circumcised. It was not necessary for salvation but it was helpful for the Christian mission. The

Bible insists that salvation is by faith – faith in Jesus, crucified and risen. To preserve the purity of faith and heart the Christian turns to the scriptures.

20 What is my overall interpretation and is it in harmony with the rest of scripture?

Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ – nothing needs to be added to it (see Galatians 2:1-10, presumably written before the Jerusalem Council, as it does not mention it). Nevertheless, the believer has to be sensitive to others. Therefore, if we knew a person who had been a strict Jew but who then became a Christian, it would be a good gesture of fellowship to invite them to our home for a meal but a thoughtful host might choose not to serve a pork pie or black pudding. Similarly, we might not serve beef to a converted Hindu and we might not serve meat at all to a converted Buddhist – not because these things are wrong in themselves but we would not make life difficult or trying for a new convert. In short, the practical teaching of the passage is that Christians should remember the sensitivities of their Jewish brothers and sisters. They should also remember that marriage has a proper basis and live accordingly. Today, sensitivity to scruples of others is difficult – especially when we do not share them. In Scotland, I had Christian friends who did not receive Sunday telephone calls. That was not a scruple that I shared but I certainly would not have rung them. People of other faith groups often feel that Christian women dress immodestly. In our highly sexualised culture we have to consider that carefully. What Christians call immorality the world might call ‘love’ but we must stand firm. I see Christians put their Bibles on the floor all the time. This would horrify Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists – who would not understand. In fact, since I have known that I have generally treated the Bible more reverently.

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