

## STUDY GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUPS

### The Journeys of Paul

Week 2: Week of January 26, 2020

Sermon Title: *A House Divided*

Text: Acts 15:1-6;12-21

#### **(For Facilitators mainly - optional for the group)**

This is a watershed in Luke's whole narrative. It comes close to the beginning of the second half of the account. The two halves depend on the success of the council's deliberations.

***In historical terms what was at stake was nothing less than the very existence of the new movement itself, both its identity and its unity – in particular, whether what had begun in Jerusalem, was going to remain in vital continuity with the Jerusalem church. And with all the Jerusalem church represented, whether the new outreach in to Gentile world now taken up as a life's work by Paul was going to become something else.***

It was imperative, before Paul's mission became extensive to address the problems caused by the success of Paul's mission for what was still essentially a Jewish sect, and to show how harmony between Jew and Gentile within the new movement could be maintained without sacrificing the continuity with and through Jerusalem.

#### **Luke's purposes:**

1. The initiative of God is brought out repeatedly (15:4,7,10, 12, 14, 16-18, 28)
2. Those provoking the issue (whether Gentile believers should be circumcised) are marginalized (15:1 – 'certain from Judaea'" 15:5 – "some believers from the sect of the Pharisees').
3. The full display of the leadership is engaged and agreed – "the apostles and the elders", Peter, James, and Barnabas and Paul; the unity of the agreement is stressed (15:22, 28).
4. The precedent of Peter's acceptance of Cornelius provides the decisive argument (15:7-11).
5. the contribution of Barnabas and Paul (in Antiochene order of precedence) is touched on briefly (15:12),
6. James is portrayed as giving a chairman's summing-up and making the determinative recommendation (15:13-21) – all of which stresses that the continuity of Christianity with the ministry of Jesus and its Jewish character is secure and determined by those most representative of that continuity.
7. James' speech focuses on a scripture which combines a restoration of Israel theology with openness to the other nations (15:16-18).

8. And the ruling recommended by James and agreed by the conference assumes that the common ground for Jew and Gentile within the new movement are the traditional Jewish concerns over Gentile idolatry, sexual license and meat from animals improperly slaughtered (15:20,29).

9. Barnabas and Paul are presented as explicitly endorsed by the apostles and elders and as emissaries of the agreement to the churches of the Antiochene mission.

This conference and issues are historically accurate. Galatians 2:1-10, Paul describes a consultation in Jerusalem. Paul, when addressing the Galatians, focuses on his own part in the agreement; and Luke with a wider audience in view, focuses on the role of Peter and James. Luke's opinions were vital, and Paul's language acknowledges his dependence on them at this point (Gal. 2:6, 9).

This account in Acts indicates a genuine commitment on both sides to hold together as one church, including some readiness to compromise on some things for the sake of unity by both James and Paul in particular. **The agreement was of epoch-making and a huge significance for the future of Christianity and in crystallizing its character as a Jewish movement opening out to accept Gentiles as such as full members.**

## Discussion Questions

### Opening Questions (optional – pick only the ones you want to choose).

What are you like when you are in strong disagreement with others?

When others are in strong disagreement with you?

When have you seen a dispute among Christians settled in a Christlike way?

### For reflection

- What is the question that arises in the minds of the Jewish leaders? Describe the conflict. What's at stake in the controversy?
- Why is this issue so important? Can you see both sides?
- Describe carefully the process of resolving this conflict (vv.6-21). How did Peter focus the attention of the council? How did he present the case for his viewpoint?
- What were the results? What scripture did James use to support Peter's story about Gentile conversion?
- How does the firsthand evidence of Paul and Barnabas affect the discussion and conclusions?
- What was James' recommendation to the council? He quotes Amos 9:11-12. What bearing did that have on the conversation?
- From what groups was the letter which announced the council decision? (vs. 23)?
- To whom was the letter addressed? How was it sent? And why is that important?
- What elements in the council's statement of the problem must have encouraged the Gentile recipients?
- Have you ever been reluctant to compromise something that is important to you? What makes it difficult?
- How important is unity among Christians for you and how does this scripture inform or impact your understanding?
- What does it mean to be of "one heart and one mind" in matters of faith? What does that look like in a relationship? In a family? In a church?
- In John 17, union with God is the prayer of Jesus. Why do you think that Jesus being one with each other and one with Christ is the prayer of Jesus?
- When we see so much division in our world, how can we work toward demonstrating a "house united"?