

## When Christians Got Together (Part 2)

### Essay #8

In this essay we'll finish our tour of Acts as we look for clues as to the reason Christians met and what they did when they were assembled.

#### The Great Divide

In our last essay we saw how controversy began to arise as a result of the Gospel being preached to Gentiles. This comes to a head in Acts 15. In verse one we see that the church was made up of different kinds of Christians – Christians who held different beliefs. Some of the Jewish believers still insisted that circumcision was necessary **in order to be saved.** Again, we are years down the road from Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out on all and yet we see that Christians did not all believe the same thing. In order to settle the dispute over circumcision, a church council or conference took place in Jerusalem. Clearly, the church leadership in Jerusalem was viewed as having significant authority in settling disputes and making decisions for all the churches. It's interesting that we have no record of any direct revelation from God in this matter but that the matter was settled in a conference. It's not hard to understand why the circumcised believers were so concerned about this issue. They were the conservative group who read in Genesis that circumcision was to be an **everlasting** covenant (Gen. 17:13) and that anyone who was not circumcised in the flesh should be circumcised from God's people (Gen. 17:14). Obviously, if you were cut off from God's people then you could not be saved so Gentiles must be circumcised and baptized to be saved. It's all very logical and appears to be simply trying to hold true to the word of God and obey it. After all, Deuteronomy 4:2 says not to add to or take away from God's commands. Just obey them. You know, speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent.

Okay, I keep wandering off from the aim of our discussion – we'll talk about law, grace and obedience in another essay, but we see that, at least on one occasion, Christians got together for a major conference in order to decide what other Christians should be taught to obey. We also see that the church was made up of different kinds of Christians. For example, verse 5 mentions Christians who belonged to the party of the Pharisees. I believe we often fail to appreciate the "Jewishness" of the church and the fact that they still tried to stick to the Law out of respect for God.

Verse 6 seems to indicate the decision-makers in the church were the apostles and the elders. And in v.19-21 we see the rules that the Gentile Christians were called to obey. Many Jewish Christians would adhere to different rules. So you might have seen great variety in the way assemblies were conducted.

In v. 32 we see mention again of prophets participating in a church assembly with the expressed purpose of strengthening and encouraging their fellow Christians (the horizontal component).

### Prayer

In Acts 16:13 we see Paul looking for the prayer place by the river. He is gathering with Jews on the Sabbath again. We know evangelism was one of his goals here but based on what we see in the book as a whole, it is likely that he was there for prayer and worship as well even though these people were not yet believers in Jesus. We see him returning to the prayer place again in v.16 and we get the impression that was done on more than one occasion. So it seems that some believers met on the Sabbath for prayer.

### Prison Ministry

Later in the chapter Paul & Silas end up in jail and we find them praying and singing hymns **to God** (vertical component). I guess you could call this the first prison ministry! It's not a typical meeting of Christians but we see prayer (as usual) and singing (something we don't see mentioned a lot in Acts). After they get out of prison we see a meeting of Christians where Paul's purpose is to encourage them (horizontal component again).

### The Synagogue

Acts 17:2 informs us that it was Paul's custom to go to the synagogue and here, in Thessalonica, he attends for three Sabbaths. Paul also goes to the synagogue in Berea (v. 10) and in Athens (v.17). In v.11 we see that examining the scriptures was something believers did when they got together. We also see Paul in the synagogue every Sabbath in Corinth (18:4) and he went to the synagogue every Sabbath for 3 months in Ephesus (19:8). And lest we think it was just Paul who attended the synagogue, we also see Aquila and Priscilla and Apollos there, too (18:26). And before Paul became a Christian, he knew he could find Christians meeting in the synagogues (26:11). We also find Paul assembling with others at the house of Titius in Corinth after he became frustrated with the lack of reception of his Jewish brothers in the synagogue.

### Confession

In Acts 19:18 the believers in Ephesus openly confessed their sins on at least one occasion when they got together.

### Encouragement

Encouragement is another theme in Acts. We've already seen it mentioned on numerous occasions and we have it again in Acts 20:1,2. Paul meets with other Christians for the purpose of encouraging them.

## Breaking Bread

We've seen the believers breaking bread earlier in Acts and in 20:7 we see it again. Most scholars seem to think this is a reference to the Lord's Supper. And here they are mentioned meeting on Sunday rather than the Sabbath. Paul also preaches (when did he not?).

## Prophets & Elders

Acts 21:9 mentions prophets in the church again – this time they are all women. They are joined by a visiting prophet from Jerusalem named Agabus (v. 10). We met him earlier in Acts. Elders are mentioned again in 20:17,28ff (from Ephesus) and in Jerusalem in 21:18.

## Different Strokes

Acts 21:20 reminds us that not all Christians held to the same beliefs. Some Jewish believers were still zealous for the Law. And even Paul joins in a Jewish purification ritual in the Temple. He wanted to demonstrate, in fact, that he was living in obedience to the Law (v. 24). As for Gentile believers, they had different rules (v. 25).

## Summary

In this whirlwind tour of Acts we have seen Christians meeting in different places:

1. Synagogues
2. Homes
3. The Temple
4. Marketplace
5. By the river
6. Lecture halls

We have seen Christians meeting at different times:

1. On the Sabbath
2. On Sunday
3. Daily
4. Different times of day

We have seen many activities taking place when Christians met:

1. Prayer
2. Healing
3. Prophecy
4. Instruction
5. Singing
6. Encouragement & strengthening

7. Financial contributions
8. Decision-making
9. Laying on of hands
10. Examining the Law & Prophets
11. Breaking bread/Lord's Supper
12. Breaking bread/eating meals together
13. Appointing leaders
14. Commissioning missionaries
15. Fasting together
16. Evangelism

### Conclusion

1. Nowhere in the book of Acts have we seen a certain day for meeting together **PRE**scribed/commanded.
2. Nowhere in the book of Acts have we seen a certain activity or ritual when meeting together **PRE**scribed/commanded.
3. We **have** seen numerous days, locations and activities **DE**scribed.

I would like to suggest that it was not Luke's purpose to set forth commands or even patterns to which all Christians must adhere. It was his purpose to provide an accurate account of the beginning and growth of the church (and I believe an apologetic for the church against enemies and skeptics). We'll look to the letters of the New Testament in our next essay to see what we might find in the way of prescriptions/commands. But for now, it seems that based on the accounts of our Christian ancestors from the book of Acts, it seems that they got together to strengthen and encourage each other through all the means mentioned in the summary and to praise God. I'd say that this principle is a good example for the rest of us to follow.

Steve Curtis