

ACTS 16–21

Acts 16:1–15. Precedent 35: Being Led by Revelation to Establish the Church

Paul went from city to city, being led by the Spirit to know what to do to establish churches in the faith. Having had Timothy circumcised, Paul took him along throughout Phrygia and Galatia (in central and eastern Turkey today), but the Holy Ghost told them not to preach in the Roman province of Asia (on the west coast of Turkey). On the northwest seacoast of Turkey, Paul had a vision of a Macedonian man beckoning Paul to come to northern Greece (Acts 16:9). Paul went to Philippi, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. On a Sabbath day there, Paul was led by the Spirit to meet several women, particularly Lydia. She was an importer of purple dye from Thyatira, a town near Pergamon. The Lord had opened her heart: she and her household were baptized, and she opened her home to Paul and his companions. From this episode came the assurance that missionaries and ministers of the gospel should follow the Spirit, even if it sometimes means going far out of one's way.

Acts 16:16–40. Precedent 36: God Delivers Paul and Silas from Prison in Philippi

On their way to a prayer meeting, Paul and his companions were legally accused of interfering with the business of a soothsayer-for-gain who offered the services of a girl who was possessed with an Apollonian spirit of divination (Acts 16:16, 19). This girl had followed Paul and his companions for days, proclaiming that they were “the servants of the most-high God” (16:17), and she was hoping for compensation. Paul was concerned for several reasons, and promptly he commanded the spirit that had possessed this girl to depart (16:18). As her soothsaying had brought her masters much money, they took this matter to the rulers of the marketplace, accusing Paul of interfering with their business. When Paul was miraculously

freed from prison, that outcome reinforced the principle that spiritual revelations are not to be bought and sold for money.

Paul and Silas were also accused of troubling the city and teaching customs that were “not lawful for Romans to receive” (16:21). Although this second legal accusation involved technical terminology, we are left to wonder what its precise nature might have been. But again, God’s hand in freeing Paul and Silas shows that Christians should not hold back in declaring truths that may be at odds with the surrounding culture.

This case proceeded as follows: Paul and Silas were summoned and escorted to the rulers and magistrates of the Roman forum (16:20). Unaware of Paul’s Roman citizenship, these officials ordered that Paul and Silas be beaten, treatment that was relatively common. The missionaries were then held overnight in prison, but after an earthquake freed them, the jailor was prepared to kill himself for fear of some official reprisal. Again, the faithful were rescued. To the jailor’s surprise, the prisoners had not fled. He took care of the prisoners and became converted. Nevertheless, in the morning, Paul and Silas were visited by the sergeants and told to leave town.

At that point, Paul called for the rulers and magistrates and disclosed his status as a Roman citizen, objecting to the public beating he had received in spite of not having been condemned (16:37). Frightened by this news, the Romans hurried to suggest politely that Paul and Silas leave town secretly, as they did not have the authority to expel a Roman citizen. Had Paul revealed his Roman citizenship earlier, that may have left Silas in trouble. Doing it after the miraculous timing of the earthquake also protected and strengthened the new Christian converts as well.

Much of this episode could be taken as a handbook for the new converts of the time, especially those dealing with the Romans. Among the lessons may have been the importance of dealing respectfully with Roman officials, behaving with integrity in the face of challenges, responding with dignity in cases of oppression and physical abuse, and seeking for positive relationships with authorities.

Acts 17:1–15. Precedent 37: Paul Averts Legal Problems in Thessalonica

Paul, Silas, and their companions left Philippi and traveled to Thessalonica. As was his usual practice, Paul went to the synagogue first. He spent three Sabbaths in discussion with the Jews “out of the scriptures,” making his points compellingly. The King James Version says Paul was “opening and alleging” his point, but the Greek words are stronger, saying that Paul was “intelligently proving” and “establishing” his case that Jesus suffered necessarily, which fulfilled prophecy, and that He was the Messiah and had been protected by God and resurrected.

Some Jews and many Greeks believed Paul, including some women of influence. However, a few unbelieving Jews roused the rabble of the “baser sort” and put the city into an uproar. The rioters and city officials then sought to arrest Paul, but they could not find him. They even stormed the house of Jason, where Paul was staying, and took him to the authorities.

The charges against Paul and the others were that they had “turned the world upside down” and violated the decrees of Caesar by saying that Jesus was king (Acts 17:7). Paul’s host, Jason, had received them as guests and was now involved because the law made hosts responsible for what their guests did. He was arraigned before the rulers of the city and was placed on probation. He posted security guaranteeing Paul’s good behavior, then he was released from custody. With the help of his friends, Paul managed to escape to Berea. The missionary activities were more successful there until irate Jews from Thessalonica pursued Paul to Berea and stirred up the same hostilities there (17:10–15).

Acts 17:15–34. Precedent 38: Paul Teaches and Testifies before the Areopagus in Athens

Again, Paul spoke out strongly in Athens against the established Greek and Roman gods. The worship of false gods was against the law in Judaism, and that rule was to continue into the new Christian Church.¹ Here Paul was able to address the rulers of Athens. Because Paul had spoken about foreign gods, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers took him to the Areopagus for this group to learn more about and to make a judgment on his doctrine. Whether this was in a philosophical or legal setting, Paul presented his views with a logical elegance that would resonate with the main schools of philosophical thought in Athens. He pointed out that the Athenians welcomed a variety of views and then agreed that there was one blood in all nations and that it was therefore logical that the resurrected Jesus would be the judge of all (Acts 17:26, 31). Paul’s Greek education and ability to debate with the philosophers and even to quote their own poetry in support of his position is impressive. Referencing the words of their own poets, he said, “For in Him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring” (17:28), quoting Cleanthes (331–232 BC) and Aratus of Soli (third century BC), who speaking of Zeus, wrote, “For we are also his offspring.”

After listening to Paul, the court took a recess, planning to hear more about the matter later, and Paul took that opportunity to leave Athens voluntarily, being glad to have gotten that far with the leaders of Athens. Out of this challenging situation came a few converts, “among whom was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them” (17:34). Sensing that the risks probably outweighed the benefits there and probably having been uncomfortable in the realms of other gods, Paul moved on to Corinth, where he would later advise his followers to refrain from using Gentile courts for any reason in 1 Cor 6:1–7.

Acts 18:1–17. Precedent 39: Paul Is Legally Exonerated in Corinth

In Corinth, Paul again, as was his habit, “reasoned in the synagogue” on the Sabbath and converted Jews and Greeks (Acts 18:1–17). At some time during the eighteen months that Paul was there, even Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue (*archisynagōgos*), was converted to Christianity.

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul felt a surging of the spirit and testified powerfully that Jesus was the Messiah. The unconverted Jews, however, rejected him, accusing Paul of persuading men to worship God contrary to the law, or of apostasy and leading people into apostasy (18:13). Paul declared that his main intent was to take his message to the Gentiles. But then he moved into the home of a man named Justus, who lived in a house adjoining the synagogue. His presence there, no doubt, annoyed the Jews since he taught right where they went in and out of the synagogue. So, they rose up and brought Paul before Gallio, the proconsul of the Roman province of Achaia, headquartered in Corinth. He declined to take jurisdiction over the case on the grounds that it simply presented a question of Jewish law, and he dismissed it (18:15). He could have taken the case had it been a matter of serious evil-doing, but nothing of that nature appears to have been alleged. And, indeed, the complaining ruler of the synagogue, Sosthenes, was beaten publicly for having troubled the Roman government with the matter. This outcome encouraged the early Saints that if they stayed strong in the faith and were courageous in their efforts, justice would prevail and they would be able to deal with adverse challenges.

Acts 18:17–21. Precedent 40: Paul Keeps a Vow

In the harbor of Cenchrea (near Corinth), Paul had his head shorn, “for he had a vow” (Acts 18:18). Such vows were agreements made with God for help or guidance with a reciprocal promise attached. It is unclear what kind of vow Paul had taken that involved cutting his hair. The verb used for “shorn,” *keirō*, is used for shearing or having one’s hair entirely cut off, or at least cut extremely short. Some authors consider that Paul may have been a Nazarite and was preparing now to fulfill that vow. The Nazarite vow required that the vow-taker not cut his hair until he was ready to “fulfill” the vow, then his hair was shorn, normally at the temple (see Numbers 6:1–21).

In Hebrew culture, any such vow was a very serious matter. Because law and religious regulations were the same, fulfilling a vow became a divine requirement as well as a legal issue. Legal parameters were drawn to establish who could make the vow, who could pledge the family’s property and money, who had authority to change the vow, and who was liable for its fulfillment. Normally, the vow had to be fulfilled in Jerusalem at the temple, and sometimes the cost of the sacrificial animals was expensive. Often a good person would show devotion by paying to complete someone else’s vow. Paul apparently was doing that in the temple when he then “went up” to the temple and returned to Ephesus by way of Antioch, Galatia, and Phrygia (Acts 18:22–23).

Accordingly, the practice of completing such vows continued during the early years of the Church while the temple was still standing. Similarly, Jewish cultural celebrations were still occasions of celebration, even if some were soon repurposed by Christians to fit new values and purposes. For example, Passover became a celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus. Pentecost was remembered as the time when the power of the Holy Spirit fell upon the Christians and people gathered from all around the Mediterranean.

Acts 18:22–19:12. Precedent 41: Paul Corrects Baptismal Practices in Ephesus

While Paul was away, Apollos, a man of Jewish origin who was born in Alexandria, Egypt, and was “an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures” (Acts 18:24), came to Ephesus and enthusiastically began teaching baptism after the manner of John the Baptist. Apollos had not yet accepted Christ as the one to whom John was referring, and his baptizing also omitted the essential teaching and giving of the Holy Ghost. Aquila and Priscilla, who had stayed in Ephesus, observed the problem and taught Apollos more completely about the gospel of Jesus Christ (18:26).

Apollos accepted the updated information and wanted to travel to Corinth. The Christian brethren in Ephesus sent a letter of introduction and a recommend with Apollos, certifying that he was a diligent and successful teacher of the gospel (18:27). It appears that much of the formal coordination of Church activities was carried out by such letter-writing.

Upon his return to Ephesus, Paul encountered some of the converts who were baptized by Apollos. He discovered that Apollos had baptized them unto repentance according to the teachings of John the Baptist, and his baptisms lacked some essential elements. When asked if they had received the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, they replied, “We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost” (19:2). Setting an important precedent, Paul then rebaptized them in accordance with the gospel of Jesus Christ and bestowed upon them the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands. In this way, Paul made it clear that there was one way, one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Ephesians 4:5), and there was not to be variations in the performance of these ordinances.

Acts 19:11–22. Precedent 42: Paul Exposes Illegal Magical Activities in Ephesus

While Paul was living in Ephesus, a group described as “vagabond Jews” were working as exorcists. Their father, Sceva, a Jewish high priest, had seven sons that were driving out spirits using the words “We adjure you by Jesus, whom Paul preacheth” (Acts 19:13). In one case, the spirit being exorcised claimed, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye?” The man they were trying to heal attacked the seven sons, prevailed, and sent them running away *gymnos*, which is translated as “naked” in the King James Version, though it can mean that just their outer clothes had come off. They were also metaphorically exposed, and “all the Greeks and Jews” in Ephesus knew.

The public reacted fearfully, “and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified” (19:17). The text says, “Many believed and confessed” (19:18). What were they afraid of? They were God-fearers. Also, they now recognized the power of the name of Jesus Christ. Practicing the dark arts, like Sceva and his sons, especially clandestinely, was not safe. Rome banned unapproved forms of divination and exorcism. The Romans believed in augury and divination, but the law required that it be practiced only by a priest and with Roman authority. The repentant citizens who had been practicing “the curious arts” brought out their books

and burned them publicly (19:19). The books were probably expensive handwritten scrolls, worth fifty thousand pieces of silver.

This whole episode had several cautionary outcomes and legal clarifications for early Christians. Even though the sons of Sceva purported to be doing good things in the name of Jesus, they were usurping authority and using the name of Jesus inappropriately. Magic in any form was to be avoided.

Acts 19:20–41. Precedent 43: Paul Dodges Litigation in Ephesus

In Ephesus, Paul also ran into problems raised by a strong organization of silversmiths that complained to officials that the Christians were degrading the sale of silver images of the goddess Artemis (Diana). Here again, the Christian message threatened a local business.

Demetrius of the silversmith association incited a group to cause a tumult in the city by leading the populace to a meeting in the theater, where they brought an action against Paul and his companions. Demetrius claimed that Paul had persuaded many people not only in Ephesus but throughout the Roman province of Asia that gods made by hand were not of God. Moreover, he also claimed that the great temple dedicated to Diana was being denigrated, threatening the great glory of Ephesus.

Two of Paul's companions, Gaius and Aristarchus, were arrested and brought before the crowd in the theater (Acts 19:29–33). Meanwhile, certain Asiarchs, who were the highest-level officers throughout the Roman province of Asia, warned Paul not to enter the assembly. In the *ad hoc* court in the theater, Alexander, a Jew, was pushed forward before the assembly as a defendant. The crowd realized that he was Jewish. This event triggered a chant in praise of the goddess that lasted for two hours.

Before Alexander could present a defense, the city manager intervened. Since this was not a case of the Church robbing from or blaspheming the goddess Diana, the manager required Demetrius, the complaining silversmith, to follow proper legal procedures by bringing a formal written complaint against these Christians in a lawfully convened assembly. In other words, the silversmiths were to bring it before the justices of the Roman proconsuls: the courts were open for that (19:38). He acquitted Paul and the believers, and fearing that Alexander's irregular actions in the theater were the greater cause of damages to Ephesus's reputation in Rome (19:40), he dismissed the large assembly that had gathered in the theater.

The report concerning this event contains a great deal of precise information, accurate legal terminology, and political details. This indicates that Luke intended this to be read through a legal lens. From this, the early Christians would have taken note to be cautious, to not overtly desecrate or damage any Greek or Roman temples, to not go beyond pointing out that these gods were not actually in these statutes or statuettes, and to work patiently through high- and low-level government authorities rather than rushing into the fray.

Acts 20:1–15. Precedent 44: Observance of Passover and the First Day of the Week

Paul took a detour from his coworkers' route to travel to Philippi, where he observed Passover or Easter and stayed for three months (Acts 20:3, 6). Perhaps he wished to spend time especially with Lydia. Passover came to be seen by early Christians as a type and shadow of the death of Jesus as the eternal paschal lamb, and the liberation of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt was taken as a foreshadowing of the victory of the Savior over death.

After leaving Philippi, the group went to Troas, where Paul rejoined others in his entourage and also met with the Christians to break bread and preach on the first day of the week (20:7). Thus, we learn that the Christians in this era met together on the first day of the week, unlike the Jews, who met on the last day of the week. The text does not say more about their regular worship than that they broke bread and preached on the first day of the week. In this case, Paul spoke a long time, and a young man named Eutychus fell asleep, fell from a top loft, and was revived by Paul (20:10).

Acts 20:15–38. Precedent 45: Giving Farewell Instructions in Miletus to Church Elders

Anticipating another Jewish-Christian holy day, Paul wanted to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 20:16). As he traveled down the coast of Asia, wishing to address and bid farewell to the Ephesian elders of the Church, he called them to a meeting in Miletus, where he gave what he anticipated would be his last charge to the elders of Ephesus (20:17–38). Miletus is just south of Ephesus, so maybe he preferred to meet with the elders of the Church there instead of in Ephesus, not wanting to rile up the silversmiths again. In this farewell, he accounted for how he had discharged his own duties, suffered troubles with Jews and Greeks, and had gone about teaching “publicly, in court, and from house to house,” persistently testifying of the Savior. He listed several obligations that he had fulfilled, setting a model for his listeners to follow in their stewardships—namely, to remain pure from the blood of all men by testifying of the gospel and declaring “all the counsel of God” (20:26–27); to be overseers and to warn everyone, discharging the duty to warn (20:28, 31); to obtain an inheritance as sons of God (20:32); and to keep all the ten commandments, down to the last not to covet (20:33), which were still in force.

Acts 21:1–14. Precedent 46: The Gift of Prophecy Is Emphasized

After arriving at Caesarea, Paul and his traveling companions stayed at the home of Philip, not the Apostle but “the evangelist, who was one of the seven” who had been called in Acts 6:5 to help the Greek widows (21:8). This Philip had four unmarried daughters who prophesied by the Holy Spirit—not for gain—in the same manner as did Agabus. This point is mentioned to reinforce the importance of the role of the gift of

prophecy among the individual members of the early Church, very notably including righteous women. Agabus was mentioned previously in Acts 11, in which he correctly prophesied of a famine in Jerusalem. Here, he prophesied by the Holy Spirit, binding his own hands and feet with Paul's sash to demonstrate that Paul would be turned over to the Romans: "So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owned this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles" (21:11). Paul understood that Agabus was prophesying accurately. Paul's response was that he was prepared to "die at Jerusalem for the name of Jesus Christ" (21:13) These prophecies were literally true. Paul went to Jerusalem prepared to die, and he was rescued from the Jews by the Romans, who then kept him in protective custody for several coming years.

Notes

- 1 Exodus 20:3–6; 22:20; Leviticus 19:4; Deuteronomy 17:2–5.

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