

23 July 2024

My Dear Theophilus (II): Change
Acts 11, 13-15

My Dear Theophilus,

You said in your last note that despite my assurances that the God of the Jews was a God for everyone, faith in Jesus still sounded like a foreign religion to you. Stay with me, though. In my letters so far, I have dwelt largely on the gathering in Jerusalem – with a few side trips to Samaria and Damascus and so on, but everything still revolved around that Jewish city. In this letter, that changes.

As I mentioned before, the believers in Jerusalem were enduring serious persecution. Peter was arrested again – and walked miraculously out of prison in the middle of the night again – but it had grown warm enough that many simply left town, taking the good news with them. I’ve mentioned the groups in Samaria and Damascus. There was also one in Antioch of Syria. There some of the refugees from Jerusalem spoke in the synagogue and were well received. Soon there was a thriving new group. They had enemies there, too, of course. It was in Antioch that some began calling followers of Jesus by the sneering insult “Little Messiahs” – in Greek we would say, “Christians.” The believers just shrugged off the abuse. After all, insults come and go. I imagine the name will be forgotten soon.

Well, when word got back to the believers in Jerusalem that there was a growing group in Antioch, they sent a man to check it out. The man they chose was our old friend Barnabas. Barnabas was excited by the potential he found among the Antioch *Christians*, but he wished they had some solid teaching. That’s when Barnabas remembered that young rabbi Saul that Jerusalem had sent home to Tarsus. Tarsus wasn’t that far from Antioch, so Barnabas went there, found Saul, and brought him back to Antioch as a teacher. Soon, Antioch had surpassed Jerusalem. When crops failed in Judea, Antioch took up a collection for the Jerusalem Christians and sent Saul and Barnabas to deliver it. When they returned, they brought a young cousin of Barnabas’s with them, named Mark. Before long, Antioch had a whole team of dedicated teachers and preachers. In addition to Saul and Barnabas, there was one called Simon the Black, another named Lucius from Northern Africa, and one called Manaen who was a former official of King Herod’s court.

One day, as the Antioch Christians were praying, the Spirit spoke to them. I don’t know how. I’ve never heard anyone call it a vision, so it was probably just a growing shared conviction. Whatever means she used, though, the Spirit communicated to them that she had a particular plan for Saul and Barnabas, beyond Antioch. So the church laid hands on their heads, blessed them, and sent them out. Now, to be completely clear here, they had no idea where they were going or what they were supposed to do. All they knew was that the Spirit wanted them somewhere out there to do something, so they went. Sometimes when the Spirit sends you on mission, part of the mission is to figure out what the mission actually is.

Saul and Barnabas went down river to the Great Sea, taking young Mark with them, and caught a ship to the island of Cyprus. There, they went to the synagogues, telling the Jews about Jesus. This they did across the whole island, arriving at the city of Paphos. The Roman proconsul, named Sergio Paulus, had his headquarters there, and having heard about the new

Jewish preachers in town, he summoned them to hear what they had to say. Maybe he was making sure they weren't preaching revolution against Rome. Or maybe he was just interested in religion: his court included a Jewish miracle worker named Elymas. Saul had never been asked to tell the good news to a Gentile before, which may be why he adopted a different name about then. Instead of Saul – the name of an ancient Israelite king – he took the Roman name Paul. Yes, Saul of Tarsus is *that* Paul. Anyway, Paul told the good news to Sergio Paulus, and when that Elymas fellow interrupted, Paul snapped, "Be quiet, you son of a ... devil. May God darken your eyes until I'm done!" Immediately, Elymas was blinded. Paul finished his sermon, and Sergio Paulus trusted in Jesus.

From Cyprus, the three caught a ship north, to the town of Perga, at which point, to Paul's disgust, Mark left and returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas went on to the Pisidian town of Antioch. (It does get confusing with all the cities named Antioch, doesn't it?) As usual, Paul and Barnabas went first to the synagogue, where Paul spoke at length. He reviewed the history of the Jewish people, and God's salvation for them through the ages, then wrapped it up by telling how all that history of salvation had been gloriously fulfilled in Jesus. A few in the synagogue were intrigued and asked them to come back the following Sabbath. When they returned to the synagogue a week later, though, it was a much larger group waiting for them. Almost the whole town was there, both Jews and Gentiles. So Paul began speaking, and an interesting thing happened. The people who shared Paul's background, the Jews, stubbornly resisted Paul's message, whereas the Gentiles that Paul hadn't even invited, were fascinated. The Jews hurled insults; the Gentiles asked questions. The Jews turned away; the Gentiles asked, "Can we follow this Jesus, too?"

Try to imagine what was going through Paul's mind. He had been strictly trained as a conservative rabbi in Jerusalem, from the party of the Pharisees, but at the same time, ever since his Damascus Road encounter with the Risen Christ, he had been rethinking his former faith. One part of his inherited faith was the belief that Gentiles were utterly separated from God, but Paul had surely heard how Peter had baptized a Roman centurion. And the Roman proconsul on Cyprus had believed, too. Now Paul stood before a crowd of Gentiles asking to know more about the salvation offered by Jesus. Paul looked at the Jews and said, "Fine. We had to start with you, but if you reject the salvation of Jesus the Messiah, we will take it to those who want it. We're going to the Gentiles now."

So they did. And many Gentiles believed, and they started a regular gathering. The Jews from the synagogue didn't let it go, though. They stirred up the crowds against him. Paul always said that the worst agitators against him were the "devout women of high standing," but I usually take what Paul says about women with a grain of salt. Anyway, Paul and Barnabas left. This wasn't the first time Paul had been run out of town, but it was the first time that he left a new church behind him.

This was to become the pattern for the rest of their travels. From Pisidian Antioch, they came to Iconium, where they went first to the synagogue. At first, at least, a few Jews were interested, but most rejected the good news, so Paul and Barnabas spoke to Gentiles, who were much more responsive. The Jews then turned on them – more because they were speaking to Gentiles than because of what they were saying – and once again Paul and Barnabas had to get out of town in a hurry. Ditto for the towns of Lystra and Derbe. After Derbe, they turned around and retraced their steps, visiting all the new churches on their way back to Antioch in Syria. Now

they knew what their mission was, what the Spirit had called them to. As Paul would phrase it in his letters: they were to be “Apostles to the Gentiles.”

I should note, though, that even though the Gentiles were much more receptive to the good news than the Jews, there were pitfalls in the Gentile ministry, too. In Lystra, for instance, Paul and Barnabas had been preaching in the streets when Paul saw a man who had been lame from birth. Paul saw the faith in this man’s eyes and paused while he was preaching to say, “Stand up and walk!” And the man did. After that, though, things took a different turn. The Gentile crowds began shouting, “The gods have come to earth! Look! They are gods!” Word was sent to the local Temple of Zeus, because the crowd decided that Barnabas *was* Zeus. He looked the most impressive. As for Paul, he must be Hermes, the messenger god, because he never stopped talking. The priests of Zeus paraded out, bringing oxen covered with garlands of flowers, preparing to offer a sacrifice to Barnabas. This was about the point where Paul and Barnabas figured out what was going on.

“Stop!” they shouted. “No! We are human beings, just like you!”\

Paul tried to explain. “Look, there is only one God, who has revealed himself in different lands to different peoples in many ways. I’m glad that you believe that there’s a world beyond this one. But we’re here to tell you that it’s different than you think, and better. The true God doesn’t require all this foolishness; he loves you, all of you – all people – and wants to lead you to relationship with him.” It’s not clear that the crowd got all this, but Paul and Barnabas managed – barely – to keep from being worshiped themselves.

Anyway, back in Antioch in Syria, Paul and Barnabas told their stories, and the church rejoiced. Eventually, word of the new Gentile churches in Asia filtered down to Jerusalem, and some representatives of the Jerusalem church arrived to ask Paul and Barnabas some questions.

“We assume that once a Gentile man believes, you immediately circumcise him, yes?”

“Um, no. That wouldn’t really be a . . . an inducement to believe, you know.”

“That doesn’t matter. It’s in the law. God may have told us that we are to include Gentiles, but he hasn’t told us we can toss out the rest of the law.”

Well, you can see their point. It’s one thing to rejoice because God is including a new group in the community of faith, but how is that going to work? What else is going to have to change to accommodate the new group? And where do all the changes end? So, the leaders at the church in Jerusalem held a council, and Paul and Barnabas, and a few others, went to represent Antioch. Peter was there, too, along with a new Jerusalem leader, named James. I probably mentioned a couple of different disciples named James back when I was writing to you the story of Jesus. Well, this wasn’t either of them. This James was Jesus’ brother, another son of Mary. He had not followed Jesus during his life, but Jesus appeared to him after his resurrection, with the result that this James had joined the Jerusalem gathering and had become the leader of its more conservative faction.

First, those conservatives spoke up, many of them (like Paul) being Pharisees. They argued that the inspired law of God was unchangeable and that new converts would need to obey the law just like everyone else. That starts with circumcision, but it includes the whole Torah. Dietary laws and everything. Then Peter spoke. He reminded them of his vision and the experience with the Roman, Cornelius. He pointed out that, in fact, no Jew actually kept the whole law either. The incredible burden of those 300-some laws had been too heavy for even

those who had been raised under the Torah. What Christ brought, he argued, was a salvation that was not based on whether we kept the law, but on God's grace. That grace is the same for everyone, Jew and Gentile both. Then Paul and Barnabas rose and told about their travels and the new churches and the hope and faith and signs of the Spirit's work that were continuing among the Gentiles.

When everyone had had a turn, the different positions had been laid out, but they were no closer to an agreement. Then James cleared his throat and spoke, "You know I am a firm believer in the authority of scripture. But scripture is more than the law. The prophet Amos spoke of a time when God would rebuild the ruins of Israel, and I believe this is the foundation of that new day. In Isaiah, God called for all the ends of the earth to turn to him. Well, the ends of the earth are turning to him. Do we dare turn them away? Because that's what imposing all our law on them would do. So let me offer a compromise: Let us not require the Gentiles to be circumcised. That can be a sign for the Jewish people, but not a requirement for acceptance by God. But let us ask this of the Gentiles. First, they must forsake idolatry entirely, in every way. Second, let them maintain sexual purity – no fornication or adultery. And finally, let them eat meat only from animals slaughtered by the rules of kosher."

That last requirement feels a little random, but James was no fool. I suspect that he knew which laws would be non-negotiable to his conservative friends. The compromise was seized on. The controversy that had threatened to split the believers had been dealt with. Paul and Barnabas, accompanied by two men from Jerusalem named Barsabbas and Silas, went back to report to Antioch and to begin thinking about where the Spirit might send them next.

And so you see, my dear Theophilus, the foreign faith is not, at heart, foreign. It is just faith. Yes, it does take on the customs and attitudes of the cultures in which it takes root, but those are just trappings, not the faith itself. And when it moves to lands with different customs, the faith can adapt to those as well. The faith itself is about God's grace and forgiveness in every culture.

I remain your friend, Luke.