

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ORGANIZING THE CHURCH

(Acts 14:21-28)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 22

This paragraph tells of the return journey of the first foreign missionaries. It includes instruction, exhortation, warning, ordination, blessing and reporting to the home church.

1. They instructed the members of the church: **“Confirming the souls”** (22).
2. They urged the members to remain faithful (22).
3. They forewarned the members of trials (22).
4. They ordained elders in every church (23).
5. They prayed for God’s blessing to rest upon the churches (23).
6. They told the home church of what God had done through them (26-28).

This paragraph tells of the return journey of the first foreign missionaries. It is summed up in a few verses and yet it is as important as the outward journey. As they went out they preached and won disciples to Christ; as they returned they organized churches, instructed and exhorted the newly made disciples. Paul and Barnabas must have believed that organizing congregations and teaching the disciples was just as important as preaching in new fields, else they would have continued on and out into new fields without taking time to retrace their steps in the work of organization. They knew that if the work was to grow where it was planted, and if the disciples were to remain true in the midst of all their temptations and opposition they needed to have order, leadership, instruction, fellowship and enthusiasm.

It would have been a much less expensive and shorter journey to return down the Roman road through the Taurus mountains, passing through the Cilician Gates to Tarsus, the home city of Paul, and thence by sea to Seleucia and over the few remaining miles to Antioch in Syria. It required courage and devotion to the work to start back over the long journey by which they had come and through the cities from which they had been driven or mobbed as though they had been criminals. Nevertheless, they resolved to return by way of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch of Pisidia. The record is very brief concerning the work of Paul and Barnabas in Derbe. There seems to have been no opposition there such as had developed at the former cities of Pisidia and Lycaonia.

The Jews who had hounded them from Antioch and Iconium to Lystra seem to have been temporarily satisfied that they had stoned Paul. Perhaps they thought he was dead and they would never be troubled with that missionary again. It is probable also that the missionaries were not in the city of Derbe all of the time, but were preaching a part of the time in the region round about (14:6). We are told definitely that they preached in the region round about Derbe and probably in the region about Lystra.

That which interests us most is that they “made many disciples” in and about Derbe. This is the *sixteenth time* that we are told that many disciples were made since Pentecost. The expression here used (v. 21), “taught many” shows that they taught those who had been made disciples. It has been thought that they remained all winter in Derbe, waiting for the roads and mountain passes to clear of snow, before making the return journey. If they did so they would have ample time to teach the disciples and organize the church. We know of at least one disciple from Derbe who later accompanied Paul in his frontier mission work. His name, Gaius, is mentioned in connection with the third missionary journey of Paul (20:4). If Paul and Barnabas had done nothing more than win the two men, Timothy and Gaius, who later became foreign missionaries, their first missionary journey would have been of great value. But they did much more for we are told distinctly that multitudes both of Jews and Greeks believed. The people of the region about the cities in which their work centered also heard the Gospel.

After they had organized the work and strengthened the disciples at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch they passed down from the high plateau and through the mountain passes again to Perga. When they passed through Perga the first time they do not seem to have paused to preach, but on the return journey they preached in Perga. Nothing is said of the results of their work there. From Perga they went to the seaport Attalia, from where they sailed back again toward Antioch in Syria. They then gathered the home church together and reported the results of their work. **“they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles”** (14:27). It is well that we shall note carefully the principal phases of their work on the return journey.

INSTRUCTED THE MEMBERS

They taught the members of the church: **“Confirming the souls of the disciples”** (14:22a). The word “confirm,” in this case is not referring to a ritual performed in some churches, but rather it means to instruct, establish or strengthen the faith of the disciples.

This was a wise and exemplary work on the part of the first missionaries. Whether their converts were Jews or Greeks they needed instruction. The Jews needed a new understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures, to be taught the meaning of the prophecies concerning Christ. These passages would help to establish them in the faith. The Gentiles, particularly those who had been heathen up to this time, needed the most careful and elementary teaching of the Word. The people then did not have the New Testament as we have it today. When they did not have a written guide they would need more careful oral instruction. They would be opposed on every hand and they needed to be ready to give an answer for the hope that was in them.

Bibles are plentiful and easily secured today, and still there is need of instruction of recently found converts. Regeneration is the first essential, but it is not all. Just as certainly as the newly born child needs the care, protection and nourishment of the mother, so surely does the babe in Christ need careful instruction. It is well that men and women shall be Christians, but it is more important that they shall be intelligent Christians.

The writer to the Hebrews did not find them, even though they had their Bibles at hand, intelligent Christians. He said they had need that some one teach them the rudiments of the first principles of the oracles of God. They were only able to take the milk of the Word, whereas they should have been ready to receive solid food as more advanced disciples. He urged them to leave the first principles and press on unto perfection: **“For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit”** (Hebrews 5:13-6-3).

That which was true of the early Hebrew Christians is often true of Christians today. They have more facilities for becoming well-informed, but too frequently they do not make use of them. There are many who have been members of the church for years who have need that some one shall teach them the rudiments of the first principles of the Word of God. So far from meditating on the Word of God day and night, as we are exhorted to do, they seem to have no regular habit of reading or studying it. They would be ashamed if they were accused of being ignorant of Shakespeare, but they do not blush when they are found to be ignorant of Moses. What would you think of a grown man who could find pleasure in nothing more than playing with little children on the street, a man in body, but a child in mind? You would say: “What a pitiable sight.” And yet such a sight among professed Christians is a common thing. They have made scarcely any growth in spiritual things.

If we recall the law of growth we know that in the vegetable world where growth ceases decay soon begins. If we, as members of the body of Christ, are not making growth we will naturally deteriorate. If we keep our talent hidden away unused, it will be taken from us. We have a partial record of what Paul said when he was evangelizing a new field, and what he said as he established them in the faith. He told them of the fact of the resurrection and of justification by faith when he first preached to them. Later he wrote at length expounding these great truths to them. To master these letters requires profound study of the Word. Nothing short of diligent, profound study will establish Christians in the faith. Therefore, the church needs not only sermons of evangelism, but also sermons to expound the great and deep doctrines of the Bible. Christians need to listen, not only to the call of Christ to come to him, but also to the teaching of Christ and the apostles, that they may follow him in the strait and narrow path that leads past all the pitfalls of the world and on to the heavenly home of perfection and glory.

URGED THEM TO REMAIN FAITHFUL

“And exhorting them to continue in the faith” (14:22b).

We are told that Paul and Barnabas, when visiting the various churches, would exhort them to faithfulness. They first instructed them and then they exhorted them to hold fast the faith. Most of the epistles of Paul take this form; we have first the doctrinal portion and then the exhortation. In epistles in which are found the most profound doctrines, there are, in the closing chapters, the most tender and practical exhortation.

Paul knew, as we know today, that head knowledge is not all that the disciple needs. Even an intelligent Christian may fall. There were many temptations around these early disciples. In the cities where they lived there were temples to false gods; there were feasts to which they were invited where meat was eaten in honor of idols; there was lasciviousness even in connection with worship; there was profanity, lust, luxury, pride, envy, falsehood, deceit, covetousness, parental neglect, pleasure, labor on the Lord's Day, and every temptation which the world could invent. The exhortation of their fathers in the faith, the earnest pleading of Paul and Barnabas whom they loved, would not be easily forgotten. Nor is the exhortation of fathers and mothers, ministers and Bible teachers easily forgotten today. Often their earnest words, perhaps their pleading with tears, or it may be their dying petitions return to us in the hour of temptation and encourage us to continue in the faith.

Just after Paul had written to Timothy - who was a disciple won on this journey - concerning the persecutions that he had endured at Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, and spoken of the imposters who would become worse and worse, he said: **"But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus"** (II Tim. 3:14-15).

On a certain occasion, it is said: "Abraham Lincoln was riding in a stage coach in company with a Kentucky Colonel. After riding a number of miles together, the Colonel took a bottle of whiskey out of his pocket and said: 'Mr. Lincoln, won't you take a drink with me?' Mr. Lincoln replied: 'No, Colonel, thank you, I never drink whiskey.' They rode along together for a number of miles more, visiting very pleasantly, when the gentleman from Kentucky reached into his pocket and brought out some cigars, saying: 'Now, Mr. Lincoln, if you won't take a drink with me, won't you take a smoke with me, for here are some of Kentucky's finest cigars?' Mr. Lincoln replied: 'Now, Colonel, you are such a fine agreeable man to travel with, perhaps I ought to take a smoke with you. But before I do so, let me tell you a little story, an experience I had when a small boy,' And this was the story:

'My mother called me to her bed one day when I was about nine years old. She was sick - very sick - and she said to me: 'Abey, the doctor tells me I'm not going to get well. And I want you to promise me before I go that you will never use whiskey nor tobacco as long as you live.' And I promised my mother I never would. And up to this hour, Colonel, I have kept that promise. Now would you advise me to break that promise to my angel mother and take a smoke with you?' The Colonel put his hand gently on Mr. Lincoln's shoulder and said with a voice trembling with emotion: 'No, Mr. Lincoln, I wouldn't have you do it for the world. It was one of the best promises you ever made. And I would give a thousand dollars today if I had made my mother a promise like that and kept it as you have done.'

FOREWARNED THEM OF TRIALS

“And that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (14:22c). Paul and Barnabas dealt fairly with the young Christians of these cities. They pointed out to them that the Christian life would be a very difficult one. They said they would face “much tribulation.” The term, “kingdom of God,” as here used, evidently means the kingdom of glory. Paul had learned this fact by experience as well as from history and Scripture. He had not yet reached the kingdom of glory, but he found that there were many tribulations along the way. He could testify that the effort to live a devout life would not eliminate tribulations. On the other hand, he had found that the more earnest he was, the more tribulations were encountered.

A large portion of *“Pilgrim’s Progress”* is an exposition of this truth. From the very beginning of his journey towards the Celestial City, Christian encountered all kinds of tribulation. They troubled him all the way to the very gate of the City. The Christian is threatened by enemies of the cross; he is tempted by men who represent themselves to be disciples; he is drawn away by his own lusts; he is help up to the scorn of the world; in fact wherever he turns he meets with trials in this world. They that will live godly must suffer persecution.

Jesus did not attempt to deceive His disciples. He taught those who proposed to follow Him that they might expect privation and tribulation. He warned one whom He thought was offering to follow Him without due consideration: **“The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head”** (Matthew 8:20). Though Jesus pointed out the fact that His followers would endure privations and trials He told them that He would be with them and make their burdens light.

Dr. Horton who was in danger of losing his sight, went to Germany to consult a specialist. One day he was in the consulting-room of the oculist in Wiesbaden, and as he waited he put his hand into his pocket and drew out his little Bible - not to read but to test his sight. As he opened it his eyes fell on the text in Second Samuel: **“For thou art my lamp, O Lord: and the Lord will lighten my darkness”** (II Samuel 22:29). “I had not been aware,” says the doctor, “of the very existence of this text, and do not know who but an angel could have led me to it, but I felt, whether I received sight or not, these words were enough.”

There was a young man in the south who had worked for years to establish himself as a peach grower. He had invested his all in a small peach orchard which bloomed bounteously - then came the frost. He did not go to church the next Sabbath, nor the next, nor the next. His minister went to see him and inquire the reason. The discouraged young man exclaimed: “No, and what is more, I’m not coming any more. Do you think I can worship a God who loves me so little that He will let a frost kill all my peaches?” The old minister looked at him a moment in silence, and then replied kindly: “Young man, God loves you better than He loves your peaches. He knows that while peaches do better without frosts, it is impossible to grow the best men without frosts. His object is to grow the best men, not peaches.” **“Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy”** (I Peter 4:12-13).

“What are our light afflictions here,
But blessings in disguise?
They only make for us a home
Of rest beyond the skies.

What if we oft are weary now,
With burdens hard to bear?
They only make the crown more bright
When we that crown shall wear.

O, cast thy every care on Him,
Thou weary burdened one,
And raise to heaven the trusting prayer,
Thy will, not mine, be done.

So, when the toil and care shall cease,
With Jesus thou’lt be blest:
When, folded in His loving arms,
The weary are at rest.”

ORDAINED ELDERS IN EVERY CHURCH

“And when they had ordained them elders in every church” (14:23a). The selection and ordination of elders in various cities, in every church which they had established, was one of the most important parts of the work of Paul and Barnabas on this first missionary journey. It served as an example or outline of the divine plan. It gave order and leadership and stability to the church. If individual members of the church had attempted to remain in seclusion or isolation they could not have continued to propagate their religion to any advantage. They themselves would likely have soon lost interest in the Gospel. There is not only strength to resist opposition, but also power to go forward where there is an organized assembly. Even individual Christians who remain separate from the church are indebted to it. It is through the church that the Gospel has been preserved through the centuries and the saving love of Christ has been made known to the world.

In the Jewish synagogue there was a board of elders. Their presiding officer was the ruler of the synagogue. The plan of organization in the synagogue was carried over into the Christian church. As Paul followed the plan already established in the Christian church he superintended the ordination of elders over every congregation. There are several facts worthy of note concerning the elders of the church, as set forth here and elsewhere in the New Testament.

The first of these is that the word, elder, refers to the ruling officers of the church. This word is used interchangeably with bishop or overseer, and refers to the same officer (Acts 20:17-28). The term elder, refers to the age of the men, and the term overseer or bishop, to the duties of the office.

Originally men well advanced in years were chosen to this office, hence they were called elders. They were chosen and ordained that they might be overseers of the church. The word bishop originally meant the same as overseer, and it came to have a changed meaning not because the original or divine plan was so intended, but because men sought and took more power to themselves and established orders of officers in the church. There seem to have been some who were ruling elders and some who were teaching elders. Paul wrote to Timothy: **“Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine”** (I Tim. 5:17).

A second fact worthy of note is that the elders seem to have been chosen by the members of the church. The word, “ordained,” means to vote by stretching out the hand. the meaning as used here is to elect, to appoint or create. The idea evidently is that the members of the church elected the elders and they were ordained by Paul and Barnabas with fasting and prayer. We conclude from the example of the apostles that, according to the divine plan, it was intended that the members of the church should vote for the elders whom they thought were best fitted for the office, and then that they should be ordained with fasting and prayer.

A third fact which is apparent here and elsewhere is that there was not merely one elder chosen, but two or more in every congregation. “Elders” were elected “in every church” (v. 23). Paul did not send merely for the elder, but for the elders of the church of Ephesus when he wanted to see them at the time of his farewell visit to Miletus: **“And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church”** (Acts 20:17).

Thus it is apparent that from the beginning of the Christian church it was the divine plan that there should be order and government within the church; that the order should be representative, every member should have a voice in the affairs of the church; that Christ should be the head from whom all officers derived their authority; that no one man should dominate in the government of the church and that they were to be guided by God’s Word and Spirit. No power, civil or ecclesiastical, has the right to set aside or override the divine plan for the church of Christ.

INVOKED THE DIVINE BLESSING

“And had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed” (14:23b). This seems to have been apart from the act of ordination, to have followed it rather than to have been a part of it. We are apt to take too lightly the blessing of the Lord in answer to the prayer of God’s saints. Paul and Barnabas must pass on to visit other churches, but they would leave them in the hands of the Lord. They knew that he had power to bless and if they would rely upon Him He would bless and guide them.

We are apt to think of a prayer such as the benediction, merely as a form of dismissing the congregation. It should not be so considered. It is a prayer to the Triune God from whom all blessings flow. If that prayer is a real prayer by one of God’s believing servants it will be accompanied with a real blessing upon the people of God.

REPORTED TO THE HOME CHURCH

They told the home church of what God had done through them: **“And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled. And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles. And there they abode long time with the disciples”** (14:26-28). When they had visited the churches, sailed back to Seleucia and had reached Antioch in Syria, where their missionary journey began, they gave an account of their work to those that had sent them out. It was especially mentioned that He had opened a door of faith unto the Gentiles. And they tarried no little time with the disciples.

It was an interesting day at Antioch when they set apart Paul and Barnabas to the Lord's work in the foreign field and sent them away. It was another important and interesting day when the missionaries returned to tell of what God had done through them. One can easily imagine that it was not hard to gather an audience that day. They knew the zeal of Paul and Barnabas. They knew that they were interesting speakers. They had reason to believe that they would have many thrilling and blessed experiences to relate.

They would tell of their first work on the Island of Cyprus and how they had been resisted by an apostate Jew, but how God had manifested His power and had won the pro-consul to Christ. They would tell of their preaching at Antioch in Pisidia and how, in the face of opposition the word spread through the whole region. They would speak with growing enthusiasm of their ministrations at Iconium and how a great multitude of both Jews and Greeks had been led to believe in the Lord. As they told of the healing of the cripple at Lystra and how the people were ready to worship them the people would lean forward and listen eagerly, but then they told of how the mob stoned Paul and left him for dead, and Paul would probably show them some scars the he would always carry on his body as a result of that terrible ordeal, sighs would be uttered by some and tears would fall from the eyes of others.

Then as they told of how God protected his life and enabled him to go on and win many disciples at Derbe, and some of them so promising for future workers, and how the people were holding fast the faith and were glad to be organized into churches in every city, they would praise the Lord for what He had done through them. The important note of all their report was that God had worked marvelously in the hearts of the Gentiles and opened the door of faith in every place where they had presented the Gospel to them.

Christ was then continuing to work by His Spirit through His disciples. He has worked wonders in recent years through modern missionaries. Men have gathered in great crowds to listen to the report of the work of Duff and Moffat and Judson and Chalmers and Livingston and Paton and Taylor. James Chalmers told interested crowds in London of his work in New Guinea. After David Livingstone had done a part of his great work in Africa, even the British Parliament was ready to listen and men would gather at any place eager to hear him speak.

After the death of Livingstone, one wrote:

“Open the Abbey doors and bear him in
To sleep with king and statesman, chief and sage,
The missionary come of weaver-kin,
But great by work that brooks no lower wage.
He needs no epitaph to guard a name
Which men shall prize while worthy work is known;
He lived and died for good - be that his fame:
Let marble crumble: this is Livingstone.”

When John G. Paton first went to Australia to try to promote the work of missions in the New Hebrides, he could hardly find a church in which to speak. But before he had ended his work there, whether in Britain, the Dominions or America, he could hardly fill the engagements which men desired to make for addresses everywhere. Hudson Taylor had much the same experience. Many others might be mentioned whose fame spread throughout the world and who were listened to by thousands in the home land. Some of the greatest names of men of history are on the roll of missionaries, chief of whom was the apostle Paul.

Notwithstanding these facts, it is too often true today that there is far too little interest taken in learning of mission work and promoting it on the part of Christian people. This is true of missions, both home and foreign. The work of the Lord on the frontier should have its deep interest for us and enlist our liberal financial support. As in the case of Barnabas and Paul, the missionaries have enough of hardships among the heathen; they ought to receive the most hearty support from those who are supposed to keep the home fires burning. Think of what we would have been if we had not known the Gospel of Christ! How would we like to be in the place of those who are left in darkness? If we are not going to go into all the world to preach the Gospel, are we not then ready to encourage, by our sympathy, our money and our prayers those who have gone or are ready to go?

A little daughter of the well-known missionary, Dr. S.M. Zwemer, (*The Glory of the Cross* - 1938, posted on our site) whose field of work among the Mohammedans was for years at Bahrain, Persian Gulf, Arabia, used to recite the words of a well-known hymn, but with a variation of her own, as follows:

“Jesus bids us shine,
With a clear blue light,
Like a little candle
Burning in the night.

“In this world of darkness,
We must shine,
You in your small corner,
And I in Bahrain.”

QUESTIONS

(Acts 14:21-28)

1. Of what does this paragraph tell?
2. What were some of the things which the missionaries did on their return journey?
3. What is meant by “confirming” the disciples?
4. How many times in the Acts up to this time have we been told that many disciples were won?
5. What disciple from Derbe later accompanied Paul in mission work?
6. How does organization of the church compare in important with evangelization?
7. What relation has the Bible and its use to a strong church?
8. Name some of the temptations which would confront the disciples of those churches?
9. How did their temptations compare with ours?
10. What did Paul say would be necessary before entering the kingdom of God?
11. What did Jesus say of the necessity of enduring privation on the part of disciples?
12. What was the value of ordaining elders in every church?
13. How did the plan of organization in the Christian Church compare with that of the synagogue?
14. Why was the word elder used of church officers?
15. Was there one or more elders in each church?
16. Does fasting have a place in the Christian church today and why?
17. Tell why the blessing of God’s saints should be considered seriously?
18. Where did the missionaries go after they had organized and established the churches which they had visited earlier?
19. What is the value of the missionaries’ report at home?
20. What does this teach us with reference to the value of the furloughs of missionaries and how they may be used?

~ end of chapter 25 ~

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