



Sermon & Small Group Study Guide



Beyond Diversity Global Gospel, Global Church Studies in the Book of Acts

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Welcome to this new study guide for the autumn teaching series.

This term we are exploring the theme '*Beyond Diversity – Global Gospel, Global Church*', using the Book of Acts from the New Testament as our text. There is, quite rightly, much talk about the importance of diversity in our world and our church today, particularly racial and ethnic diversity. This amazing book has so much to teach us about this critical subject.

You may be holding this study guide because you are a member of a small group at St James. That's fantastic! Small groups are key to our strategy for nurture and discipleship, so we are delighted that you are in one. We hope you enjoy using this guide to prepare for your group meetings and then to explore the material together. Being in a small group is by far the best way to learn and grow as a disciple of Christ.

You may be holding this study guide as a member of St James who, for whatever reason, is *not* in a small group. You can find out more about small groups by reading the Small Group Purpose Statement on page 3 of this study guide. If you would like to join one, then please speak to Rob or Johan. If you can't manage that, then we don't want you to miss out on the benefits of the studies. Why not work through the studies yourself after each sermon or, better still, arrange to do them with a friend over a coffee.

The study guide is also available on the church web site – www.stjames-streatham.org

We have included some blank pages for sermon notes. Why not bring your study guide to church on Sunday morning or use it when you watch the service online at home and take notes during the sermon. And, if you miss a sermon, you can always catch up by watching the recording of the livestream on our YouTube channel or visiting the church web site.

So, buckle up, here we go!

Small Group Purpose Statement

Small Groups at St James are small, Christ-centred communities meeting regularly for Bible study, fellowship, prayer, worship and service, fun, mutual support, accountability, and mission. Group members will encourage each other to grow as active disciples, rather than passive spectators, encourage others to join a group and support those who wish to grow in leadership.

Our expectation is that:

Group members will come to know the saving love of God in their lives more deeply as they pray and study the Bible together.

They will be mutually encouraged to become more like Jesus in every part of their lives.

Group members will support each other in prayer and keep all prayer requests confidential. They will come to trust each other and be accountable to each other for those things the Holy Spirit is prompting them to change in their lives.

Group members will share each other's practical needs and seek to provide what they can to meet them.

They will be encouraged to grow as active disciples rather than passive spectators.

Group members will encourage others to lead and join a group.



Introduction to the Series

It has rightly been said that there is only one race – the human race.

However, God has created the one human race with such glorious ethnic diversity, and this is something to cherish and celebrate. Nowhere should that be truer than in the church. The world-wide body of Christ is wonderfully diverse with thousands of languages and cultures and colours included on an equal footing, and this is something that will continue on into eternity. When we get to heaven, we don't lose our ethnic distinctives and become some monochrome, amorphous mass, rather we retain our ethnic distinctives and glory in them as God puts them on display as a kaleidoscopic mosaic of his creative and redemptive love and power (see Revelation 7 v 9-10).

God's plan to bring people from every ethnicity into relationship with him reaches into eternity past, but we first see it clearly in the pages of Scripture in Genesis 12. Here God calls an ageing idol-worshipper from Iraq (Abram) to up sticks and follow him, spurning his false gods and trusting in the one true Creator God. This God promises Abram (whose name he later changed to Abraham) that one day *all nations* would be blessed through him (Gen 12 v 3). Through the rest of the Old Testament, God's attention is mainly focused on one nation, one ethnic people, the descendants of Abraham's grandson, Jacob, the people of Israel. But careful readers of the Old Testament will notice occasional hints dropped into the story by the Holy Spirit that God's plan announced to Abraham in Gen 12 v 3 was still on track, that people from every ethnicity would one day be included in God's family (see for example the stories of Jonah, Naaman, Ruth, Rahab, some of the Psalms and much of the prophets, particularly Isaiah).

This glorious promise was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus – his birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and outpouring of the Spirit. The church of Jesus Christ began as a narrowly nationalistic entity, almost exclusively Jewish and confined to Jerusalem. However, after Jesus won eternal salvation through his sacrifice, he commanded his small band of Jewish followers to take the Gospel throughout the world and make disciples of all ethnicities. It was like throwing a stone into a pond and watching the ripples move out from the centre. By the command of Jesus and the invincible power of the Holy Spirit, the church and Gospel began to spread across the known world and became a gloriously diverse family. So, the promise of God to Abraham began to be fulfilled and is still being fulfilled today.

The Book of Acts is essentially the true story of how this global church and Gospel movement happened. Written by Luke, it charts the racial and ethnic transformation of the church on its journey from Jerusalem to Rome. Our series will dig into the Book of Acts to mine some of the precious nuggets of gold God has for us on the subject of diversity in the church today. I have titled this series, 'Beyond Diversity' to make it clear that what are talking about is not mere *attendance* of people of different ethnicities in church, but their *activity*, not mere *presence* but *full participation* in the life of the church. The church belongs to Jesus Christ, and we all have an equal and vital part to play in it, whoever we are and wherever we are from.

I hope you find our journey together through the Book of Acts exciting, challenging and ultimately life-giving.

Soli Deo Gloria



Study 1: The Pebble & the Ripples

Acts 1 v 1-12

Context:

Acts is the second in Luke's two-volume work about Jesus. Like his Gospel, he writes Acts for Theophilus (see Luke 1 v 1-4), and in this book he tells the true story of the spread of the Gospel and the growth of the church, from Jerusalem to Rome. In today's study we see how this great global movement began.

Observation:

1. What does Luke say was the subject of his first book (v 1)?
2. How much of Jesus' ministry did the first book cover (v 2a)?
3. What did Jesus do before that particular event (v 2b)?
4. What did Jesus do after his suffering (v 3a)?
5. How long did this period last and what did he spend his time speaking about (v 3b)?
6. What command did Jesus give his apostles in v 4-5?
7. What question did they ask him in v 6?
8. What was Jesus' initial reply (v 7)?
9. How did he then continue his answer in v 8?
10. What happened next (v 9)?
11. What were the apostles doing and who appeared beside them (v 10)?
12. What did they tell the apostles (v 11)?
13. What did the apostles then do (v 12)?

Meaning:

1. Whilst the name 'Theophilus' could be a symbolic way of referring to a whole church community (Theophilus means 'Lover of God'), most commentators on the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts believe it refers to a specific individual, perhaps a high-ranking Roman official ('Most Excellent Theophilus – Luke 1 v 3). So, in the very first verse we discover that this is a Gentile (Luke) writing to a Gentile (Theophilus). How does this set the scene for the main theme of the whole book?
2. What do you think is the significance for the Book of Acts by Luke describing his former book as a record of all that Jesus '**began** to do and teach'?
3. From your knowledge of Luke's Gospel, what were some of the ways in which Jesus presented himself to his apostles after his suffering and what 'convincing proofs' that he was alive did he give them?
4. Luke tells us that Jesus spent the 40 days between his resurrection and ascension teaching his apostles about the kingdom of God (see v 3). What kind of things do you think he might have taught them?
5. Jesus told them that they had already heard him speak about the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift the Father promised (see v 4). Luke probably has two biblical references in mind here: first, with regard to the Father's promise - Joel 2 v 28-32, and second, with regard to what Jesus had told them about this gift – Luke 24 v 44-49. Looking at those two biblical passages, what do we learn about this gift?

6. Why does Jesus draw a parallel between John's water baptism and the promised Holy Spirit baptism (v 5)?
7. What does the apostles' question in v 6 reveal about the way they were still thinking at this stage about God's plan of salvation?
8. Jesus' initial reply (v 7) could be understood to mean God was indeed planning to restore the Kingdom of Israel, but it wasn't for the apostles to know when that would happen. However, some have suggested, in light of the fact that Jesus spent 40 days speaking about the Kingdom of GOD not ISRAEL (v 3) and the global dimensions of Jesus' words in v 8, that Jesus was politely encouraging them to see that they needed to change their narrow, nationalistic focus on Israel to God's great global focus on the world. What do you think?
9. Looking at Jesus' words in Luke 24 v 46-48, what was to be the content of the apostles' witness (v 8)?
10. Knowing what we do about typical Jewish attitudes to Samaritans and Gentiles, how do you think the apostles would have received Jesus' radical words in v 8?
11. What is the significance of v 12 as a response to v 11?

Application:

1. If the apostles who had spent 3 years with Jesus needed the power of the Holy Spirit to engage in mission, how much more do we who have never seen him? Can you share anything from your experience of how you have been aware of the Holy Spirit's powerful enabling in helping you to be a witness for Jesus?
2. In what ways do we, as individuals or as a church, have too narrow or nationalistic a focus or understanding of God, the Gospel or the Church? How can we move away from that to embrace God's great global perspective?

Pray:

- For the power of the Holy Spirit!
- For forgiveness for narrow nationalism and God's grace to embrace his global vision.

Sermon Notes:

Study 2: The Wind & the Fire

Acts 2 v 1-21

Context:

In our previous study we saw Jesus throw a metaphorical pebble into the mission pond so that the ripples would flow out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, with the effect that the Gospel would reach people from every nation. At the moment this was still just a theory, a hope, an aspiration, because at this point the Gospel and the Church were still narrow and nationalistic in scope, based exclusively in Jerusalem and impacting only Jews. However, that was all about to change. Remember how Jesus told his apostles to wait in Jerusalem until they had been clothed with power from on high? Well, fasten your seat belts, here we go!

Observation:

1. What day was it and where were the apostles (v 1-2)?
2. What did they then hear and see (v 2-3)?
3. What was the result of this phenomena and what effect did it have (v 4)?
4. Who was staying in Jerusalem at that time (v 5)?
5. Why did they gather together (v 6)?
6. How were they feeling and what did they ask (v 7-8)?
7. Where did the members of the crowd come from (v 9-11)?
8. What were the two different reactions in the crowd as described in v 12-13?
9. Who was the spokesman for the apostles (v 14)?
10. Who was he addressing (v 14)?
11. Why was it ridiculous to claim the apostles were drunk according to v 15?
12. To which Old Testament prophet does he refer to explain what was happening (v 16)?
13. What did God promise to do and when and for whom (v 17a)?
14. What categories of people does Joel mention and what would be the effect on them (v 17b-18)?
15. What cosmic signs would accompany this event (v 19-20)?
16. What would be the ultimate outcome (v 21)?

Meaning:

1. What did the Jewish feast of Pentecost (aka the Feast of Weeks) celebrate (see Leviticus 23 v 15-22) and why do you think God choose this day to pour out the Holy Spirit?
2. Why do you think the Holy Spirit came with wind and fire – what was the symbolic significance of these two phenomena?
3. What is the significance of the words 'each of them' in v 3 and 'all of them' in v 4?
4. Why do you think the effect of being baptised in the Holy Spirit was the supernatural ability to speak in other languages (see v 6, 8, and end of v 11)?
5. How would this begin to fulfil Jesus' words in Acts 1 v 8?

6. Although both those who were declaring the wonders of God and those who heard them were all Jews or Jewish converts, how does the mention of so many countries from which they came serve as a sign of God's promise and of what will come later in the Book of Acts?
7. Why do you think some in the crowd were amazed and perplexed and sought a meaning for what they saw and heard (v 12) and why do you think others thought they were drunk (v 13)?
8. How does God's promise through Joel embrace diversity (v 17-18)?
9. The spiritual gift of prophecy can have many different manifestations in the Bible, but here we are meant to understand prophecy as 'declaring the wonders of God' (end of v 11). What do you think that means? What wonders of God did they declare?
10. Thinking of the combined events of Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and the outpouring of the Spirit, how were the cosmic signs of v 19-20 fulfilled?
11. What is the ultimate purpose of Pentecost according to v 21 and how was this purpose fulfilled on this day according to v 38-41?

Application:

1. Can you share any experiences you have had of sharing your faith with others? How did the Holy Spirit empower you to do that?
2. There is so much diversity in this Pentecost passage – ethnic/cultural, gender, age, social/economic. To what extent does our church family reflect this diversity? How can we become even more diverse?
3. Joel's prophecy envisaged diversity as more than just the presence of diverse people in the church family, but also full participation. How can we be better in fulfilling our mission statement of Empowering, Enabling, Equipping in ways that embrace diversity?
4. Pentecost was a reversal of Babel (see Genesis 11). Whereas, at Babel, under God's judgement, diversity of languages led to division, at Pentecost diversity of languages led to salvation. How do we see ethnic diversity bringing both division and salvation in the world and the church today?

Pray:

- For a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit to declare the wonders of God.
- For our church to become ever more diverse in participation not just presence.

Sermon Notes:

Study 3: Cultural Crisis in the Church #1

Acts 6 v 1 - 7

Context:

One of the stunning features of life in the early church in Jerusalem was the way in which the members cared for each other in very practical ways. We see hints of this in Acts 2 v 44-45 and 4 v 32-35, where church members would sell personal possessions and share the proceeds with their poorer brothers and sisters in Christ. Maybe this is what Jesus had in mind when he said that his followers would be known outside the church by the quality of their love for each other. The word 'fellowship' in the Greek language in which the New Testament was written means 'a deep sharing of life' and this practical love and sharing of material possessions was a beautiful demonstration of this. However, in today's study we see that this love and practical fellowship didn't necessarily extend to every ethno-cultural group in the church!

Observation:

1. What positive news about the church do we read about in the first part of v 1?
2. But it wasn't all good news! Which two groups were at odds with each other (v 1)?
3. What was the cause of the dispute (v 1)?
4. Who took the lead in seeking a resolution and what did they do (v 2a)?
5. Why did they not take direct responsibility to solve the crisis (v 2b)?
6. What solution did they propose (v 3-4)?
7. What were to be the qualifications of those chosen (v 3)?
8. Who were chosen to sort out the crisis (v 5)?
9. What did the apostles do with them (v 6)?
10. What was the impact of this decision (v 7)?

Meaning:

1. It is interesting that Luke mentions the rapid growth of the church at the beginning of v 1 before citing the divisions in the rest of the verse. To what extent do you think the diversity divisions were a consequence of this rapid growth?
2. Hellenistic Jews were Jews who had been born in the Jewish diaspora outside Israel and would have spoken Greek and followed Greek customs and culture. Hebraic Jews were Jews who would have been born in Israel and would have spoken Aramaic or Hebrew. Why do you think these two groups would have been at odds with each other, even though they were all Jewish by race and religion? Why would the Hellenistic Jewish widows have been overlooked in the food distribution?
3. Historical records suggest that many Jewish widows from the Greek-speaking world would have moved to Jerusalem to live out their last days. Why would the food distribution issue have been particularly problematic for them?
4. Do you think the apostles were right or wrong to delegate this practical issue to others in favour of their ministry of preaching and prayer (v 2, 4, 7)?
5. What can we learn from this principle of the church members rather than the apostles choosing who they thought best to deal with the issue?
6. Why did they need to be full of wisdom and the Spirit (v 3)?

7. The names of all seven of the men chosen to deal with the issue are Greek (Stephen & Philip were names sometimes taken by Jews living in Israel, but this was very rare). So, what can we learn from this principle of appointing men from the group being discriminated against to deal with the problem? Was this inappropriate bias or sound wisdom?
8. Why do you think the strategy they chose to deal with this explosive issue resulted in such positive outcomes (v 7)?

Application:

1. It could be easy for us to deceive ourselves that all is well in our church because it is growing and there are lots of good things happening, when in fact there are problems under the surface. How might we make sure this doesn't happen to our church?
2. Can you think of any examples in your experience or our own church of the kind of ethno-cultural problems we see in this passage, where one group is overlooked or discriminated against?
3. What can we learn from this passage to help us in such circumstances?

Pray:

- For God's forgiveness for ethno-cultural sin.
- For God's wisdom to resolve ethno-cultural tensions and issues in the church.
- For the growth of the church & spread of the Gospel.

Sermon Notes:

Study 4: The Gospel Reaches Samaria

Acts 8 v 1-25

Context:

We saw in our first study in this series that Jesus told the apostles that they would be his witnesses from Jerusalem throughout Judea & Samaria & to the ends of the earth. However, by the time we reach chapter 8 the apostles haven't ventured outside Jerusalem, the ripples have not yet begun to spread, the Gospel and the Church are still narrow and nationalistic in nature. But that is about to change in a surprising way.

Observation:

1. What event does 'On that day' refer to in v 1?
2. What was the immediate result of this outbreak of persecution (v 1b)?
3. How did the actions of the 'goldy men' in v 3 contrast with those of Saul in v 4?
4. What did those who had been forced to leave Jerusalem do (v 4)?
5. Where did Philip go and what did he do (v 5)?
6. Why did the Samaritan crowds pay such close attention to Philip (v 6)?
7. What kind of 'signs' did Philip perform (v 7)?
8. What was the result of all this (v 8)?
9. What had Simon been doing in that city and what had been the effect on the people (v 9, 11)?
10. What was the boast made about Simon (v 9b-10)?
11. What was the essence of Philip's message and what impact did it have (v 12-13)?
12. What did the apostles back in Jerusalem do when they heard about Philip's success in Samaria (v 14)?
13. What did they do on their arrival and why (v 15-17)?
14. How did Simon react to what he saw (v 18-19)?
15. What was Peter's response (v 20-23)?
16. How did Simon react to Peter's words (v 24)?
17. What did Peter & John then do, both in that city and other Samaritan villages (v 25)?

Meaning:

1. What can we learn about the way God works from the fact that it took a great persecution to fulfil Jesus' command to take the Gospel from Jerusalem to Samaria (v 1-4)?
2. Around 700 years before the coming of Jesus, the northern kingdom of Israel had been defeated by the Assyrians and the majority of the population had been taken off into exile to live elsewhere in the Assyrian empire. At the same time, captives from other defeated nations were brought in to live in the northern kingdom of Israel to replace those Jews who had been taken away. They were different from the indigenous Jewish population who were left living in the land – ethnically, racially, culturally, religiously – but gradually they inter-married with them and created a hybrid-religion, a blend of the Jewish faith and the religions they had brought with them. Their descendants were the citizens of Samaria – the

Samaritans we read about in the Gospels and those we meet in today's study who responded so positively to Philip's preaching. This made the Samaritans very different to the Jews living in the south (Jerusalem & Judea) and in the far north (Galilee). How does this history help us to understand the animosity directed by religious Jews in Jerusalem, Judea & Galilee towards Samaritans and why would it be surprising, even shocking, to Jews that the Gospel should reach the Samaritans?

3. What was Philip's mission strategy and how did it compare to the way Jesus taught his followers to do mission (see Luke 9 v 1-6, 10 v 1-9)? Why do you think performing miraculous signs was an important accompaniment to preaching the Gospel?
4. The Samaritans in the city had clearly been impressed with Simon's powers of sorcery but were now more impressed with what Philip was preaching and doing. If *both* Simon & Philip had been performing miracles, why do you think the Samaritans chose to accept the Gospel and be baptized – what was the difference between what Simon offered and what Philip offered?
5. Why do you think the apostles back in Jerusalem were so concerned about what was happening in the Samaritan city that they sent two big hitters (Peter & John) to check it out (v 14)?
6. Why do you think the Samaritans had not yet received the Holy Spirit even though they had been baptised in water in the name of Jesus (v 15-17)?
7. What warnings should we heed from v 18-23 about the dangers of being over-impressed by miracles, both *seeing* them and *performing* them?
8. How do we know that Peter & John had now accepted that Samaritans could really become followers of Jesus and that the Gospel should really go to them (v 25)?

Application:

1. None of us enjoy suffering and we wouldn't pray to receive it, but what do we learn from this passage to encourage us to believe that God is sovereign and works his purposes out even in suffering (v 1-8)? Can you think of any similar examples in your own life or the experience of other Christians?
2. What are some of the challenges for Christians in heeding Jesus' command to take the Gospel to people who are different to us – socially, ethnically, culturally, religiously – and to accept each other as equal members of the church?
3. How can we find the right balance between being appropriately impressed by God's supernatural power and an unhealthy interest in the miraculous?

Pray:

- For faith to 'see' God at work in our difficult circumstances.
- For God's grace to embrace diversity & overcome prejudice.
- For God's forgiveness when we have refused or been reluctant to share Jesus with or reach out to those who are different from us.
- For God's wisdom to have a biblical approach to God's supernatural power.
- For peace and understanding in the Holy Land today between Jews, Samaritans & Arabs.

Sermon Notes:

Study 5: The Gospel Reaches Africa

Acts 8 v 26-40

Context:

Today's study is the third time we have seen Philip in action. In study 3, Philip was one of the seven men full of wisdom and the Spirit chosen by the Jerusalem church to help sort out a cultural crisis whereby Greek-speaking Jewish Christian widows were being discriminated against in the daily food-aid distribution. Then, in study 4, we saw Philip having to leave Jerusalem due to the outbreak of persecution following the martyrdom of his colleague Stephen. As a result, he became the first to share the Gospel with Samaritans and was used greatly by God to bring a spiritual awakening to an entire city. In today's study we will see Philip's passion for the Gospel reaching further still, with the result that the continent of Africa received good news of Jesus for the first time.

Observation:

1. Who spoke to Philip in v 26?
2. Where did he tell Philip to go (v 26)?
3. Who did he happen to meet along the way (v 27)?
4. Where had this man been and why (v 27b)?
5. Where was he going and what was he doing as he travelled (v 28)?
6. Who spoke to Philip and what did he tell him (v 29)?
7. What did Philip hear as he came near the chariot and what did he ask (v 30)?
8. What was the man's reply and what did he invite Philip to do (v 31)?
9. What part of Isaiah did the man happen to be reading (v 32-33)?
10. What did he then ask Philip (v 34)?
11. What did Philip then do (v 35)?
12. What did the man ask Philip when they came to some water (v 36)?
13. What did they then do (v 38)?
14. What happened after they came out of the water (v 39)?
15. Where did Philip appear next and what did he do (v 40)?

Meaning:

1. How do you think the angel communicated his message to Philip (v 26)?
2. How does God speak to you today? Can you share any of your own experiences of hearing God speak to you?
3. What two things about the man Philip met on the road to Gaza would have made him an unlikely candidate to hear the Gospel, as far as most Jews would have believed at that time (v 27)?
4. This man held a position of great significance and importance – what would be its equivalent today (v 27)?
5. Despite the two things mentioned in question 3, this man was actively pursuing God. What particular things was he doing to demonstrate his hunger for God (v 27b-28)?

6. How do people today show their hunger for God? What are the best ways for someone who doesn't yet know God to pursue him?
7. God deliberately told Philip to travel on *this particular road* at *the exact time* this man was travelling home from Jerusalem and, as we will see in a moment, *at the exact moment* the man happened to be reading a critical biblical prophetic passage about Jesus. What does this tell us about God?
8. As a loyal Jew, what barriers do you think Philip would have had to overcome to ask his question in v 30? How might Philip's experiences in Samaria in the previous study have helped to prepare him for this encounter?
9. What can we learn from v 30-35 about the natural way we can engage in evangelism? Can you share any experiences from your own life of engaging in such evangelistic conversations?
10. If you were to explain the good news about Jesus starting with the passage this man was reading from Isaiah, how would you do it, what would you say?
11. Why is baptism in water such an important part of becoming a Christian (v 36-38)?

Application:

1. The term 'Ethiopia' in the Bible could refer to a wider area than modern-day Ethiopia, including Eritrea and part of Sudan? However, today Africa has more Christians than any other continent in the world – an estimated 760 million by 2025 - and in Ethiopia alone 63% of the population are Christian. As far as we know, this Chancellor of the Exchequer was the first to take the Gospel to Africa – this amazing growth all began with him. How does this illustrate Jesus' parables in Luke 13 v 18-21?
2. In the 19th and 20th centuries Europe and North America were the strongest centres of Christianity and were responsible for sending most missionaries into the rest of the world. Mission was then essentially '*from the west to the rest*'. However, just as in the early years of Christianity, when the strongest centres were in the Middle East and Africa, in the 21st century there has been a seismic shift in numbers so that now most Christians live in Latin America, Africa and Asia rather than Europe and North America. So, today mission tends to be '*from everywhere to everywhere*'.
 - a. So, to what extent do white western Christians still think of Christianity as a *white western* religion? How is this reflected in the life of the church and nation?
 - b. How can the presence of UKME/Global Majority Christians in our churches help us to understand that Christianity is NOT a white, western religion (and never really has been)? Can you share any examples from your own experience? [Note: UKME/Global Majority stands for people in UK of minority ethnic heritage (as compared to the majority UK population) but of Global Majority heritage when the majority UK population is compared to the rest of the world].
 - c. To what extent do we need missionaries from other parts of the world to come over and help to re-evangelise the UK? Can you share any experiences of this actually happening?
3. How can you be alert to the promptings of the Holy Spirit guiding you to share Jesus with others, as he did with Philip in our text?
4. What can you do to help you have a better grasp of the biblical Gospel so you can share it with others and answer their questions, as Philip did in this text?

Pray:

- For those who feel that God isn't interested in them because of their nationality or some other factor in their lives.
- For greater understanding between people of different ethnicities and cultures in our nation and our church.
- For the sensitivity to discern God's promptings to share the Gospel and courage to do so.

Sermon Notes:

Study 6: The Gospel Reaches Cornelius

Acts 10 v 1-48

Context:

Back in our first study we saw Jesus throw a proverbial pebble into the mission pond and since then we have seen the ripples spreading out from the centre. We have begun to see the way in which a narrow nationalistic Gospel and Church (Jewish in nature and Jerusalem in location) is slowly becoming a great global enterprise, reaching people and places beyond imagining. In today's study we see this phenomenon continue, as Peter learns a vital lesson which will upend his life for good and take the Gospel across yet more boundaries.

Observation:

1. Where is this story set and who are we introduced to in v 1?
2. How are he and his family described in v 2 and how did they demonstrate this?
3. What happened to Cornelius and when in v 3?
4. What did Cornelius say to his surprise visitor and what reply did he receive (v 4)?
5. What was Cornelius told to do in v 5-6 and what did he do in response in v 7-8?
6. What did Peter do and when in v 9?
7. How was he feeling and what happened to him in v 10?
8. What did he see in v 11-12?
9. What was he told to do in v 13?
10. What was his reply in v 14 and what response did he then receive in v 15?
11. How many times was this repeated (v 16)?
12. What happened as Peter was reflecting on what had just happened (v 17-18)?
13. Who now spoke to Peter and what did he say (v 19-20)?
14. What did the visitors say in response to Peter's question (v 21-22) and what did Peter do (v23a)?
15. What did Peter do the next day (v 23b) and what preparations had Cornelius made (v 24)?
16. What did Cornelius do as Peter entered his house and how did Peter react (v 25-26)?
17. What did Peter say to the large group gathered in the house (v 27-29)?
18. After Cornelius had told Peter about the visit he had received from an angel (v 30-32), what did he then tell him in v 33?
19. What stunning thing did Peter say in v 34-35?
20. What are the highlights of Peter's telling of the Gospel in v 36-43?
21. What happened as Peter preached (v 44)?
22. How did the Jewish onlookers know what had happened (v 46) and what was their reaction (v 45)?
23. What did Peter propose and why (v 47-48)?

Meaning:

1. Why do v 1 & v 2 seem so strange together?
2. What do you think the angel meant by his words in v 4b?
3. Why would the vision that Peter received have been so shocking to him (v 9-15)?
4. Why do you think God showed him the same thing three times (v 16)?
5. What was the ultimate meaning of the vision (see v 28)? Why do you think God used a vision to teach Peter this important lesson rather than just telling him straight?
6. What barriers would Peter have had to overcome to do what he did in v 23?
7. Peter's words in v 34-35 *cannot* mean that a person can be eternally saved simply by fearing God and doing what is right (see also v 2), because God still sent for Peter to come and preach to Cornelius about Jesus and *only then* did he receive the Holy Spirit and baptism in water. So, what do you think Peter means by his words in v 34-35?
8. What do you think is the significance of the above question for people of other faiths today?
9. What are the essentials of the Gospel as described by Peter in v 36-43? Are you surprised by anything he has *included* or *excluded*?
10. Why would a circumcised Jew have been so shocked by what happened in v 44, 46?
11. Are we ever shocked by the kinds of people God chooses to save? Why?
12. Both in the previous study and this one, baptism in water happens immediately after someone puts their faith in Jesus, without any delay. Why is that important and what can we learn in our church from this practice?

Application:

1. Conversion to the Christian faith is very rarely a spontaneous, split-second event. It is usually a journey during which God has been slowly and patiently preparing the person's heart to hear and receive the Gospel and be saved. This is exactly what we see with Cornelius. In what ways can we see this in our own conversion story, and can we also see it in the lives of those we are praying for to become Christians?
2. It is difficult for us to fully appreciate just how shocking Peter's vision and the Lord's words would have been to him (v 9-15), because kosher food laws were so important to a religious Jew. But God used this vision to encourage Peter to be willing to share the Gospel with a Gentile, which would have been just as shocking to him. What kinds of barriers, spiritual or cultural, can get in the way of us sharing the Gospel with people who are not like us? How can we overcome these barriers?
3. If you had the opportunity to share the Gospel with someone, what would you say and how, if at all, would it differ from how Peter does it in v 36-43?

Pray:

- For those whom God is preparing to hear & receive the Gospel.
- For eyes to recognise God's preparatory work in others.
- For boldness to overcome barriers to share the Gospel with those who are not like me.
- For grace to be able to summarise the Gospel and share it when we have the chance.

Sermon Notes:

Study 7: The Gospel Reaches Syria

Acts 11 v 19-30

Context:

Sadly, in recent years we have become used to associating Syria with civil war, unspeakable atrocities and mass movement of refugees and migrants. One Syrian family, fleeing the violence, has even taken up residence here in Furzedown, thanks to the kindness of the local churches and community. Perhaps, therefore, it is hard for us to imagine that Syria was once a significant centre of Christian witness and evangelism, where the church was strong for many centuries. In today's study we learn how that honourable story all began.

Observation:

1. Who does Luke refer to in v 19a and where did they go?
2. Who did they share the Gospel with (v 19b)?
3. However, some began to cross boundaries (v 20) – where did they come from, where did they go, and who did they share the Gospel with?
4. What impact did they have (v 21)?
5. Who was sent from Jerusalem to check this out (v 22)?
6. What did he see there, how did that make him feel, and what did he do (v 23)?
7. How is he described in v 24 and what impact did his ministry have?
8. Where did he then go and why (v 25)?
9. What did they then spend a whole year doing (v 26a)?
10. What two names/titles are given to the followers of Jesus in v 26b)?
11. Who came to Antioch during this period and where did they come from (v 27)?
12. What did Agabus predict and when did it actually happen (v28)?
13. How did the Christians in Antioch respond to this prophecy (v 29-30)?

Meaning:

1. In v 19 we see Jesus' words in Acts 1 v 8 being fulfilled a little more as the Gospel reaches Phoenicia (modern-day Lebanon), the island of Cyprus, and Antioch (a city on the Syrian coast). Why do you think the disciples shared the good news with Jews only, even though the majority population in these places would have been Gentile (v 19)?
2. Why do you think some of the Jewish disciples from Cyprus and Cyrene (modern-day Libya) made the decision to share the good news with Greeks (i.e., Gentiles/non-Jews) in Antioch? What kinds of barriers would they have had to cross in order to do this?
3. How do we know that God approved of this mission strategy?
4. Why do you think the Jerusalem Church sent Barnabas to Antioch (v 22)? – see something similar in Acts 8 v 14.
5. What kinds of evidence of God's grace do you think he saw in Antioch that convinced him that this was a genuine movement of God (v 23)?
6. What evidence of God's grace do we see in our own church to prove that we are the real deal?
7. How did Barnabas' actions in v 25 demonstrate the truth of the description of him in v 24?

8. From what we know of Saul in the Book of Acts, what barriers would Barnabas have had to cross to bring him to Antioch (v 25-26)?
9. The name 'Barnabas' means 'Son of Encouragement' and it was a nickname given to him by the church. Why do you think they preferred this to his proper name, Joseph (see Acts 4 v 36-37)?
10. What do we learn from the reason Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch about what new believers most need when they come to faith (v 26a)?
11. What does the word 'Disciple' mean and why is it a good term to use for people who believe in Jesus (v 26b)? Why do you think they were also called 'Christians' in Antioch? It is likely that this name was used by other people to label the followers of Jesus, rather than used by themselves – so, do you think it was used positively or as an insult?
12. How do v 29-30 so powerfully demonstrate unity in diversity in the extended church?

Application:

1. What kinds of barriers stand in the way of us sharing the good news with people of other races, cultures, social status and other differences? How can we overcome such barriers?
2. Barnabas & Saul clearly regarded teaching the new believers in Antioch as a priority. How do/can we ensure that teaching takes priority in our church today?
3. To what extent do we have a responsibility to share material support with Christians beyond our nation or ethnic/cultural group today? How can this be a positive expression of our unity in diversity and what may be some of the dangers?

Pray:

- For grace and courage to cross barriers with the good news.
- For more signs of the grace of God at work in our church.
- For the teaching ministry of our church.
- For a heart to meet the material needs of fellow Christians from other ethnic/cultural groups to our own and for wisdom to avoid the dangers.

Sermon Notes:

Study 8: Building a Multi-Ethnic Church

Acts 13 v 1-5

Context:

In our previous study we were introduced to the church in Syrian Antioch. As far as we can tell, this was the first Christian community in Syria and it was a thoroughly multi-ethnic church from the very beginning, including both Jews and Gentiles among its members. In today's study we explore that phenomenon further.

Observation:

1. What two ministries are mentioned in v 1a as being active in the church in Antioch?
2. What are the names of the ministers mentioned in v 1b?
3. What were they doing in v 2a?
4. Who spoke in v 2b and what was the command given?
5. What did they do in response to this command in v 3?
6. Where did Barnabas and Saul go (v 4)?
7. What did they do on the arrival (v 5)?

Meaning:

1. What was the job of teachers and prophets and how do these two ministries both differ and complement each other?
2. The names mentioned in v 1b reflect the multi-ethnic nature of the Antioch Church – Barnabas was a Jew from Cyprus; Simeon was also called Niger and was almost certainly a Gentile of colour from Africa; Lucius was a Roman name, and he came from Cyrene (modern-day Libya), so he was probably a Gentile of colour from North Africa; Manaen was probably a Jew and had a wealthy, influential background; and Saul was a Jew from Turkey. How surprising and significant is it that there was such ethnic diversity in both the *membership* and *leadership* of the Antioch Church?
3. What was the work the Holy Spirit had called Barnabas and Saul to do (v 2)?
4. How do you think the Holy Spirit communicated this command to the church?
5. The Antioch Church was multi-ethnic in its membership and leadership and was also committed to mission and evangelism. How do you think these two things were connected?
6. Even though Saul and Barnabas headed to Gentile territory (Cyprus) they nevertheless preached at first to Jews only. Why do you think this was? [See the account from later in their mission trip in Acts 13 v 42-48 for more on this question.]

Application:

1. I chose the title 'Beyond Diversity' for this series to stress the need for multi-ethnic churches to move beyond presence to participation, beyond attendance to activity. In other words, Jesus demands that we don't just celebrate the presence and attendance of people from diverse ethnicities and cultures in church but strive by God's grace to ensure full participation and activity for all. To what extent did the Antioch Church succeed in this task?

What are some of the barriers to achieving this goal? How is St James doing in achieving this goal and what can we do to be better?

2. The Antioch Church had both black members and leaders. In this Black History Month, how far do you think the church and society in the UK has come in following the Antioch example and how far has it yet to go? Can you share any examples from your own or other people's experiences?
3. The Antioch Church was also committed to mission and evangelism beyond its own borders. To what extent does St James reflect this commitment and how could we do better?

Pray:

- Thank God for the multi-ethnic nature of our church at St James.
- For God's grace to be better at encouraging greater participation and equality for all.
- For forgiveness where we have been racist in our attitudes, words or actions.

Sermon Notes:

Study 9: Cultural Crisis in the Church #2

Acts 15 v 1-31

Context:

The Gospel ripples continue to spread across the ancient world as we move through the Book of Acts, witnessing the way in which the Gospel and the Church were transformed from being narrow and nationalistic (exclusively Jews in Jerusalem) to a truly global phenomenon, reaching both Jews and Gentiles in Samaria, Syria, Africa, Cyprus and many other places. It was inevitable that the clash of cultures between Jews and Gentiles would cause some friction in the church and questions would be asked about the extent to which the Jewish laws and customs should apply to the new Gentile Christian converts. In today's study this issue comes to a head in one of the most significant church meetings ever to have taken place.

Observation:

1. Where did the teachers come *from* and *to* in v 1 and what were they teaching?
2. From what you know of the nature of the Antioch Church from our previous studies, why would this have been controversial (v 2a)?
3. What decision was made in v 2b?
4. Where did Barnabas and Paul stop on route, what did they report and what was the reaction (v 3)?
5. What party did the believers in v 5 belong to and what did they demand?
6. Who met to consider the issue (v 6)?
7. What event that we have previously explored did Peter then speak about in v 7-9 and what conclusions did he propose in v 10-11?
8. Who spoke next and what did they speak about (v 12)?
9. Who had the final word in v 13 and to which source of authority did he refer in v 15-18?
10. What conclusions did he propose in v 19-21?
11. What did the leaders decide to do in v 22 and what did they send with them (v 23a)?
12. What did the letter say (v 24-29)?
13. How was the letter received in Antioch (v 30-31)?

Meaning:

1. Why does the teaching in v 1 contradict what we know of the Gospel?
2. It was Jewish followers of Jesus who were pushing this agenda in Antioch and yet, Paul and Barnabas were also Jews but disagreed sharply with them (v 2). Why do you think they took such a different view?
3. How does Peter emphasise the sovereign actions of God in his report about the conversion of Cornelius and his household (v 7-9) and what does this tell us about God's view on the issue under discussion?
4. Why do you think Peter refers to the Jewish Law as 'a yoke' (v 10) – see also Matthew 11 v 28-30, Galatians 5 v 1.

5. How does Peter say people can be saved (v 11)? What does this mean and how does it relate to the question of keeping the Jewish Law?
6. What would have been the significance to the question under discussion of Paul and Barnabas reporting the signs, wonders and miracles God had done among the Gentiles (v 12)?
7. James, a brother of Jesus, was the overall leader of the Jerusalem Church. Why do you think it was important for him not to make a decision on this important matter simply based on personal experience and testimony, but by referring to Scripture?
8. Although the decision is made not to require Gentile Christians to be circumcised and obey the whole Jewish Law (v 19), nevertheless they are required to observe some minimum standards (v 20, 29). Why do you think they came up with this particular compromise?
9. What do you think it means when it says in the official letter that this decision 'seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us'? How do we discern and decide if something is good to the Holy Spirit and to us?

Application:

1. What would you say to someone who claims: 'I am saved by grace alone, so it doesn't matter how I live my life'?
2. What would you say to someone who says: 'I am saved by living my life in obedience to God's commandments'?
3. How does Acts 15 help us answer the above two questions?
4. Every culture has its own formal or informal customs and 'rules', its own ways of doing things. How can a multi-ethnic church make this cultural diversity a cause for celebration rather than division and tension?
5. How does Acts 15 provide a model example to today's church of how to discern the will of God on controversial matters? Can you think of any current controversial issues being discussed in the wider church in the UK where applying this model would help us reach the right conclusions?
6. How might church life be different for us today if a different decision had been made in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15?

Pray:

- For God's grace and wisdom to prevail in controversial discussions in the church today.
- For cultural differences to be a strength to the church rather than a cause of division.

Sermon Notes:

Study 10: God's Great Global Gospel Plan

Acts 17 v 16-34

Context:

Our brief journey through the Book of Acts is almost at an end. In this series we have seen the way in which the Gospel and the Church spread out from Jewish Jerusalem to take root in the Gentile world, fulfilling Jesus' command to go and make disciples of all nations, to the ends of the earth. In this final study we hear Paul preaching in Athens and giving us an insight into the very heart of God and his great global Gospel plan.

Observation:

1. What did Paul see as he waited for his colleagues in Athens and how did he feel (v 16)?
2. What did Paul do in response, where and with whom (v 17)?
3. Which two groups debated with Paul in v 18, what did they say to him and why?
4. Where did they then take him and why (v 19-20)?
5. How are the population of Athens described in v 21?
6. How does Paul begin his speech in v 22-23?
7. How does Paul describe God in v 24-25?
8. How does Paul describe the sovereignty of God over the human race in v 26 and what does he say was God's reason for creating the different nations of the world in v 27?
9. What encouraging news does Paul deliver at the end of v 27 and in v 28?
10. Why does Paul think it is unreasonable to think of God as an idol made by human hands (v 29)?
11. What is God's attitude to such beliefs (v 30) and why is it so important to heed this (v 31)?
12. What was the reaction to Paul's mention of the resurrection (v 32)?
13. What was the immediate impact of Paul's preaching (v 34)?

Meaning:

1. Why do you think the presence of so many idols in Athens caused Paul such distress (v 16)? Do we and should we feel this way today about other religions? Why/Why not?
2. What can we learn from Paul's response to the distressing situation he faced in Athens (v17-18)? How might we respond to the presence of so many different religious and spiritual beliefs in our society today?
3. The Areopagus was like a cross between the city council and a debating society. How does Paul combine both great respect for the Athenians' religious beliefs and practices, even though they distressed him, and the courage to confront them in v 22-23? What can we learn from this approach to help us when we speak with people of other faiths?
4. What do you think of Paul's claim that the reason God made the various peoples and nations of the world was that they might seek him, reach out for him and find him (v 24-27)?
5. Most religions are based on the understanding that we need to do things for God in order to be acceptable to him. How does Paul turn this common view on its head in v 24-25? How does this challenge your understanding of God?

6. Paul quotes two Greek poets/philosophers in v 28. To what extent is it important for us to quote and refer to modern culture/art/TV/Literature etc today in our sharing of the good news? Can you think of any good examples of this?
7. We tend to think of faith and repentance as an invitation which people can either accept or reject, and most Gospel preaching reflects that understanding. How does Paul present a very different understanding in v 30 and what difference does that make to the way we should communicate the Gospel today?
8. How much does Gospel preaching today include reference to the coming judgement (v 31)? Why is it important to speak about the coming judgement and how can we speak of it to those who are not yet Christians?

Application:

1. Make an analysis of Paul's speech, identifying the different sections and the various strategies he uses to communicate his message? To what extent does this speech provide us with a good model for our sharing of the Gospel today?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 9 v 19-23 where Paul outlines his general mission strategy. How do we see this at work in his approach in the Athens and what can we learn to help us in our sharing of the good news today?

Pray:

- For God to give us his heart for those who don't yet know him.
- For both respect and boldness in our sharing of the good news with people of other faiths.
- For wisdom in finding the right strategy to share the good news in our modern world.
- For grace to obey God's command to repent and believe in Jesus!

Sermon Notes:

