

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 16,

Acts 15-16

6-Min. Video Overview

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How does a movement actually change the world? You know, you'd think it would be some grand strategy all planned out, but history is almost never that clean. Today we're going to get into the really messy, totally unexpected story of how the early Christian movement made its leap from Asia Minor into Europe. And believe me, it's a story about a breakup, a bunch of wrong turns, and a weird dream that just goes to show history almost never moves in a straight line.

So that really brings us to the big question, right? How does an idea, a world-changing idea, manage to cross an ocean, a continent, an entire culture? So you'd probably think there was this master plan, right? A war room with maps and pushpins, a perfectly crafted strategy for global expansion. Well, for this movement, it was nothing like that. Nope.

It all kicked off with a really bitter professional breakup, a frustrating series of dead ends, and one single kind of cryptic dream in the middle of the night. And that's exactly where our story begins. All right, so let's get right into the movement's first big growing pain.

It's this clash between doctrine and division. See, the leaders had just sorted out this huge theological problem, but a deeply personal one was about to blow up their most effective team. And I mean, just look at the irony here.

On one hand, you have the movement's leaders solving this massive doctrinal issue that could have ripped them apart. But on the other hand, two of their biggest heavy hitters, Paul and Barnabas, get into what the text calls a sharp disagreement over a young guy named John Mark. And it gets so bad that they actually break up the team.

They split. It's just this powerful reminder that even when you're trying to change the world, human relationships are still incredibly So this breakup, as painful as it was, actually forces Paul's hand. He's got to build a new team, which brings us to our next section: a brand new team and a totally new strategy.

And his very first move shows just how flexible and, honestly, how pragmatic he could be. So Paul brings on this young guy named Timothy. And Timothy's background is absolutely key to this whole story.

His mom was Jewish, but his dad was Greek, and his dad had forbidden him from being circumcised. Now, in that world, this put him in a really tricky spot. To some Jewish people, he wasn't really Jewish.

To Gentiles, he wasn't really a Gentile. He was kind of stuck in the middle, which created a real challenge for the mission. And this table right here perfectly illustrates Paul's leadership style.

It's all about principle versus pragmatism. See, a while back with another guy named Titus, Paul absolutely refused to have him circumcised. That was a line in the sand, a matter of principle to defend the gospel itself.

But now with Timothy, he does the complete opposite. He has him circumcised. Why? Not for salvation, but purely for the sake of the mission, so he could connect with Jewish audiences without this being a stumbling block.

It was a totally strategic, contextual move. So the new team is assembled, and they head out. This brings us to the mysterious call to Europe.

And as you're about to see, their journey started with one closed door after another. And it took a single strange vision to finally point them in the right direction. Okay, so first they try to go west into the big important Roman province of Asia.

That's modern-day Turkey. It's the logical move, right? But nope. For some reason, the text doesn't explain.

They feel spiritually blocked. That door slams shut. All right, plan B. They pivot and try to head north toward the Black Sea.

And again, they're stopped. Two tries, two dead ends. It's like they're being guided by a series of no's getting funneled further and further northwest.

And all these no's funnel them right here to this place, Troas. It's a major port city, not far from the legendary site of ancient Troy. But more importantly, they've run out of road.

They are literally backed up against the Aegean Sea with nowhere else to go on land. And it's right here, at this moment, when they're totally stuck and probably super confused, that everything pivots. Paul has a vision, a dream.

He sees a man from Macedonia—that's across the sea in Europe—begging him, come over to Macedonia and help us. After all those closed doors, finally, this is their yes. And you have to understand what a huge deal this was, symbolically.

For centuries, the story had been one of European powers like Alexander the Great marching east and conquering Asia. Now, you have a faith that was born in Asia being invited to cross west into Europe. Not with an army, but with a message.

It's like the whole cultural tide was turning. So they get on a boat and head straight for Macedonia, landing in a city called Philippi. And the very first people they meet in Europe? Well, they could not be more different from each other.

It's a perfect snapshot of how broad the appeal of this new message was. First up, there's Lydia. She is an absolute boss, an independent, successful businesswoman who deals in luxury purple cloth, which was a very big deal back then.

She's the head of her own household, a devout woman. And when she hears the message, she's all in. She immediately becomes the mission's first European supporter, their patron.

She represents wealth, agency, and high social standing. And then, in a complete 180, they encounter this unnamed slave girl. She is spiritually tormented by what the text calls the spirit of a Pythoness, which basically means she's a powerful fortune teller.

And her owners are exploiting this, making a ton of money off of her. She is the total opposite of Lydia: unnamed, powerless, and trapped in a system of economic exploitation. So you have this message of spiritual freedom crashing right into an economy built on exploitation.

And yeah, things are about to get ugly. This collision is going to spark a violent backlash. For days, this girl follows them around, shouting about who they are.

Finally, Paul just- he's had enough. He's annoyed, but he's also moved with compassion. He turns around and commands the spirit to leave her.

And boom, just like that, it's gone. In a single moment, she's spiritually free. But her freedom comes with a massive, immediate consequence.

And here's where the real trouble starts. Because now that the spirit is gone, her ability to tell fortunes is gone too. So what's her economic value to her owners? Zero, nothing.

Their entire income stream just vanished overnight. And let's be super clear about this. The riot that breaks out, the reason Paul and his partner Silas get arrested and beaten, it has nothing to do with religion.

Her owners didn't care one bit about theological differences. This was 100% about the money. They lost their asset, and they were furious.

And this whole episode leaves us with this really powerful, kind of uncomfortable question that echoes all the way from that ancient street to our world right now. When an act of liberation, spiritual, social, whatever, disrupts an established economic system, who really ends up paying the price?