

J. Paul's Second Missionary Journey (15:36-18:22)

God's providential timing is impeccable. The outward movement of the gospel saw the influx of Gentiles into the Church, and it was their swelling ranks that provoked the Jerusalem Council. The council could not occur until the Spirit had brought the Church to a certain stage of development, but once that had been achieved, there could be no delay without devastating consequences. The Spirit had been ingathering Gentiles in increasing numbers, and He had done so in view of the providential day of illumination and decision that had now come to pass.

Now that the Gentile question had been resolved, the Spirit's work in the world and in the Church could proceed. Paul's ministry at Antioch and in Asia Minor laid the foundation for the Jerusalem Council; his subsequent labors in the gospel drew upon it. That is to say, the fruitfulness of his gospel preaching among the Gentiles provoked and provided the context for the council, and its decision became a central component of his subsequent ministry and message (cf. 15:30-35 with 16:1-5).

The council's letter was a definitive benchmark in the life of the Church. Henceforth the Spirit could do His work of ingathering free of the impediment of unresolved questions and concerns. The letter succinctly prescribed the terms of Gentile inclusion in the covenant community, but its value and efficacy for the Church lay in the apostolic interpretation and explanation that attended it. Moreover, by explaining to the churches the meaning of the four-fold prescription, the apostles were providing crucial insight into the fulfillment and transformation of *all things* that had come in Christ. What appeared at first glance to be a narrow set of prohibitions was, in the hands of the Spirit-led interpreters, a window into the nature and meaning of the "fullness of the times" and the ushering in of the new creation in Christ.

Thus the council's determination became a permanent possession of Christ's Church, being woven into the very fabric of the apostolic gospel and its proclamation. If the Christ event was the starting point for the Church's self-understanding, the council's letter, interpreted by Christ's apostles, took that foundational revelation a step further by explaining *how* the Church is built on the foundation of Christ and what that means for its life, message, and mission.

1. So Luke recorded that, after Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and Silas and Barsabbas had departed back to Jerusalem, the two apostles, along with other teachers, continued to instruct the saints there, building them up in the word of the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures (15:32-36). (Verse 15:34 was almost certainly added to the text by a later copyist seeking to reconcile verses 32-33 with verse 40; however, the context clearly states that Silas returned to Jerusalem with his companion. It is unclear whether he returned later or was summoned by Paul; either way, he had no idea of the important role he was going to play in the outworking of God's purpose of global ingathering.)

Silas was poised to become Paul's right-hand man, albeit through a painful providence. But as difficult as it was, this circumstance bore its own witness to the unchanging pattern of the divine work in salvation history: The Lord works in mysterious ways, not dependent upon the insight, judgment, and actions of His servants, but through and even in spite of their weakness, ignorance and, at times, their willful disobedience.

Whatever role (if any) personal and/or spiritual failures played in Paul and Barnabas' disagreement and separation, God was nonetheless working according to His wise purpose. In every generation from that fateful day in Eden, God's accomplishment of His eternal design for His creation has depended upon nothing but His own power and faithfulness. Even his godliest servants don't contribute anything to that accomplishment; to contrary, they tend to undermine it. But if Abraham and David were unable to hinder God's purpose by their selfishness and folly, the two apostles would not be able to.

2. Paul and Barnabas had labored together in harmonious unity for more than two years. They stood side-by-side through every sort of adversity and challenge; who would have thought that a seemingly minor issue involving John Mark could dismantle what far greater threats and obstacles had been unable to.

The specific point of contention was whether or not John Mark should accompany Paul and Barnabas as they again departed Antioch to visit the churches established on their first mission (15:36-38). (As with Silas, Luke provides no explanation for how John Mark came to be back at Antioch; ref. 13:13).

- The reason for the dispute was the fact that John Mark had abandoned the work on their previous mission. As far as Paul was concerned, that settled the question of his accompanying them a second time; they needed committed, faithful, and persevering laborers in the arduous and trying ministration of Christ's gospel, not men of faint heart and weak constitution.
- Barnabas flatly disagreed with Paul's position. Perhaps he sincerely believed that John Mark was a valuable and needed addition to their team; perhaps he was simply expressing his devotion to his cousin and his sense that Mark needed to be reaffirmed in his calling and ministry in the gospel.

What threats, opposition and adversity hadn't been able to accomplish the two men's temperaments and convictions did. The fiercely disciplined, hard-driving and intense Paul had come to an impasse with the gentle and forgiving "son of encouragement" and neither man was able in good conscience to embrace the other's conviction. The only resolution was for each man to honor his own conscience: Barnabas determined to re-engage John Mark in the ministry of the gospel, and that commitment left Paul no choice but to seek a replacement for Barnabas in his own ministry. God provided that man in the person of Silas (15:40).

This episode has troubled many down through the centuries. In the first place, the intensity of the dispute and the two apostles' separation from each other appears to be an overreaction to a relatively minor issue. Beyond that, it seems sharply out of character for Christ's godly servants and contrary to the spirit of the gospel. Some have even assigned to Paul the sin of hypocrisy: This man who so passionately insisted to the saints that they maintain their unity with one another in the spirit of love, forgiveness and deference was himself all too ready to separate from his faithful co-laborer over a petty difference of opinion. These considerations and others warrant a closer look at this circumstance.

- a. The first thing to consider is the psychology of the dispute. That is the first step toward discerning the reason for and meaning of its outcome. Christians often conclude that this episode was simply a regrettable result of pride, stubbornness and unreasonableness. Moreover, the fault is frequently assigned to Paul, so that this passage is viewed as highlighting contrasting examples of Christian conduct: Paul is criticized as hard, unyielding and unforgiving while Barnabas is lauded as an example of compassion, forgiveness and restoring mercy. This assessment is possibly correct, but the context arguably points in a different direction.

First of all, there is no indication that the church at Antioch found fault with or took a stand against either man. Luke noted only that the church committed Paul and Silas to the Lord's grace as they went out together (15:40). This can be construed negatively, as the brethren giving the whole matter over to God, having been unable to resolve the conflict themselves. But more likely, Luke was indicating the church's *commendation* of Paul and Silas: They sent them with their blessing, entrusting the two men to the Lord's grace as they went out from Antioch in the service of Christ and His gospel (cf. 13:1-3 with 14:25-26).

Luke was silent regarding the church's response to the conflict between Paul and Barnabas and obviously this silence can be interpreted in different ways. An argument from silence is never conclusive, but Luke's lack of commentary, the congregation's commendation, and the place of this account within the larger context suggest that this dispute and its outcome should be viewed positively.

Rather than being motivated by pride, stubbornness or hard-heartedness, Paul and Barnabas appear to have been acting out of godly conviction. In that case, their dispute and separation reflected single-mindedness toward Christ and not concern for themselves and their own agenda.

- 1) Paul was opposed to taking John Mark because he had forsaken them at Perga on their previous mission (15:38). But knowing Paul, his refusal had nothing to do with feeling betrayed or resentful at having to take up the slack left by the young man's departure. Paul's concern wasn't *Paul*, but Christ. He had a profound and compelling sense of his calling; from that day on the Damascus road Paul's life had been marked by resolute and undistracted commitment to fully carrying out Christ's commission, whatever the cost to his own interests and comfort – even to his life. Paul had no personal agenda; his agenda was Christ's (cf. Acts 26:1-20 with 20:17-27, Philippians 1:12-21; Colossians 1:24-29, and 2 Timothy 4:1-8).
- 2) The same was true of Barnabas. The Scripture's portrait of him indicates that he had no personal motive in wanting to take Mark with them. He reached a different conclusion than Paul, but he shared the same heart for Christ and the ministry of the gospel. Both men were fully dedicated to the goal of people coming to know Christ and be perfected in Him. Barnabas simply saw a role for John Mark in their labors that Paul didn't.

Paul and Barnabas assessed the situation differently, but that doesn't necessitate that either man was wrong or culpable. There is a place for different convictions in Christ's Church – indeed the Church's life and well-being depend upon it. Paul and Barnabas were very different men with different personalities: One was intense and incisive with a brilliant analytical mind; the other was more congenial, easy-going and personable. But both were godly men, filled with the Spirit and greatly used by Christ. *Couldn't both have acted in good conscience with a sincere desire to honor Christ, His Church and His work in the world?*

These considerations are important in view of the tendency to try to assign fault in every instance of disagreement among Christians. While such situations generally imply the presence of sin, that isn't necessarily the case. Christ's Church is composed of different individuals with different personalities and perspectives, and this means that there will be always be differences of opinion and conviction in any congregation, even among the most godly and mature of saints.

There may indeed have been culpability in this disagreement, but if so Luke gave no indication of it. The reader is left to either speculate concerning where the fault lay or conclude that there was none. Again, the context seems to support the latter. This is not to say that the brethren would have rejoiced in Paul and Barnabas' dispute and their decision to go separate ways. At the same time, they had no doubt of the two men's love for Christ and one another and that would have given them confidence that this outcome was of the Lord. He would continue to build His Church – now through two missionary teams instead of one.

- b. A second consideration is Luke's reason for including this episode in his account. The most apparent is that it explains to the reader how Silas came to accompany Paul on his second missionary journey in the place of Barnabas. Whether this was Luke's sole reason or he had another one isn't clear; what is clear is that this passage bears an important relation to the preceding context.

The Jerusalem council established that the singular obligation of the Gentile believers – and, by implication, their Jewish brethren also – is unqualified, undistracted devotion to their Savior, Lord and King. Christ's people are to guard themselves against every form and expression of idolatry, and the contention between Paul and Barnabas reflects back on that obligation.

- If their dispute is viewed negatively, it shows the failure of one or both men to meet their duty of single-mindedness toward Christ. Rather than seeking His mind and glory respecting Mark, Barnabas and/or Paul were thinking and acting in accordance with their own sensibilities and desires.
- If, on the other hand, this episode is viewed positively, it highlights the important truth that faithfulness to the obligation of singular devotion to Christ doesn't preclude differences of conviction among the saints or even the outcome of believers taking separate paths in their service to Him.