

3. Paul and Barnabas determined to go out from Antioch separately. Barnabas took his cousin John Mark and headed for the coast to sail to Cyprus; Paul departed with Silas and traveled north into Asia Minor. This is the last time Luke mentions Barnabas; the balance of his account focuses on Paul and his labors in the gospel. This should not, however, be construed as Luke's negative assessment of Barnabas, but reflects two other considerations. First of all, Luke recognized Paul as Christ's chosen apostle to the Gentiles, so that his attention was appropriately directed toward his ministry. But from a more practical standpoint, Luke focused on Paul's ministry after his separation from Barnabas because he was Paul's companion in those labors. Paul was at the center of the expanding Gentile mission, and Luke was with him, at least from this second missionary journey onward and through his imprisonments (cf. Acts 16:6-17, 20:1-15, 21:1-17, 27:1-28:16 with Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 23-24).

Paul's intention was to visit the congregations established on his previous mission and that design led him and Silas through Syria into Cilicia at the southeast end of Asia Minor (15:41). Their initial goal was Lycaonia and the cities of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, but the route into that region took them through other areas and cities in which the gospel had born its fruit. In every place, Paul and Silas sought out the congregations of believers, delivering to them the council's decree and ministering to them (cf. 15:41 with 16:4-5).

Eventually the pair arrived at Lycaonia and the city of Lystra. There Paul and Silas encountered a disciple named Timothy. Paul's design had been to visit and encourage the churches; God's design reached beyond that goal to include the raising up of a new and profoundly important servant of His Son and His gospel. Divine providence had brought Silas into the Pauline ministry, and so it would be with Timothy.

- a. Timothy was a resident of Lystra who had a Jewish mother and Greek father. Nothing is known of his father, who possibly had died by this time (note 16:3b), but Paul named Timothy's mother and grandmother as women who shared his faith in Christ (2 Timothy 1:5). The exact relationship of their faith to his isn't clear, but the scriptural record provides a couple of insights.

First of all, Timothy's mother and grandmother became Christians before him and so would have ministered to him their new-found faith. They were Jews who had reared him in the Scriptures to know the God of Israel (2 Timothy 3:14-15); now that they recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah, they surely would have impressed that truth upon Timothy. But Lois and Eunice had believed in Christ through Paul and Barnabas' ministry; therefore, even if the two apostles had left Lystra by the time Timothy was saved, Paul could still refer to him as his "child in the faith" (1 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Timothy 1:2, 18; 2 Timothy 1:2).

- b. Luke doesn't say what struck Paul concerning this young man. The saints in and around Lystra spoke highly of him (16:2), but Paul would have himself had to see something in Timothy in order to feel confident taking him with him. His dispute with Barnabas over John Mark shows that he wasn't a man who took lightly either the work of the gospel or the fitness of a man to engage in it.

- c. Whatever it was that Paul saw in Timothy, he became convinced that he should accompany Silas and him as they continued their mission. But before doing so, there was something that needed to be taken care of: *Timothy needed to be circumcised*. Luke's only explanation is that the Jews of that region knew that Timothy had a Greek father (16:3). Nothing is said concerning how his family came to be so widely-known, but it certainly wasn't that they had a prominent standing in the Jewish community since Timothy's father was a Gentile. Notoriety rather than prominence seems the likely explanation: Timothy's mother and grandmother were Jews and had probably been active in the synagogue in Lystra. In that way Eunice's scandalous marital situation would have become well-known among the Jewish population. And because her Greek husband wasn't a proselyte, the Jews would have assumed that Timothy himself had not been circumcised.
- d. Luke noted that Paul circumcised Timothy "*because of the Jews,*" but this explanation leaves important questions unanswered.
- In the first place, this action on Paul's part seems to directly contradict the decision that had just come out of the Jerusalem Council – the very decision that Paul himself had argued for. The council had decreed that Gentile believers were not to be circumcised, and here Paul was taking Timothy and circumcising him.
 - It also appears to contradict Paul's consistent teaching that circumcision is of no value whatsoever (Galatians 6:15-16; cf. 2:1-3; also 1 Corinthians 7:17-20). Quite the opposite, the one who undergoes circumcision cuts himself off from Christ's benefit (Galatians 5:1-6).

These considerations suggest the unhappy conclusion that Paul was perhaps not as convinced of his position as he indicated in his writings. A worse possibility is that he was pragmatic or even duplicitous, ready to set aside his convictions when expedience or advantage overruled them. For obvious reasons both of these solutions are unacceptable, but there are at least a couple of other options:

- 1) The first draws upon the distinction between legalism and godly obedience. It starts with the premise that what the council – and Paul – rejected was Gentiles being circumcised as a means of personal righteousness in connection with the Law of Moses. They objected to the legalistic application of circumcision, not circumcision itself. This is said to correlate with the Christian's general obligation to God's law: Christians are required to keep God's commandments, but not as a matter of securing righteousness. Paul and the council recognized that no person is justified by the works of the Law – including circumcision, but this doesn't mean Christians have no obligation to any of the commandments contained in the Mosaic Code. In Christ, men are now enabled to understand the true meaning of the Law as well as submit to it as a matter of inward conformity rather than mere outward compliance.

In this view, the council's decision addressed Gentile believers undergoing circumcision as a legal obligation of personal righteousness. But that wasn't a concern in Timothy's case; he had come to understand the spiritual truths signified by the ritual of circumcision. And having been liberated from a legalistic, self-righteous mindset, he could undergo circumcision properly as an act of true worship and devotion.

On the surface this view may appear to have biblical merit, but it fails at several crucial points:

- First, neither Paul nor the New Testament writers anywhere indicate that it's proper for a Christian to be circumcised as long as he discerns its spiritual meaning and doesn't regard it as an instrument of self-righteousness. Paul insisted that circumcision *itself* is nothing, not that it becomes nothing when it's wrongly conceived. As well, he instructed uncircumcised Gentiles to remain uncircumcised, not wait to be circumcised until they understood its true spiritual meaning (ref. again 1 Corinthians 7:18-20).
- Secondly, the reason circumcision is nothing is that it has found its antitypal fulfillment in Christ. Like the Law itself, circumcision was critically important in the preparatory salvation history; now, in the "fullness of the times," it has served its purpose and passed away – not by abrogation, but by fulfillment. Bodily circumcision has found its destiny in the spiritual circumcision done by Christ through the Spirit; to call for physical circumcision – under any condition or circumstance – is to call men to embrace the shadows alongside the substance (cf. Colossians 2:8-17).
- Finally, the context doesn't support this understanding. Luke explicitly stated that Paul circumcised Timothy *because of the Jews*. Moreover, this concern was framed by Paul's desire to have Timothy come alongside him and Silas in their mission work.

The Jews, not Timothy, were behind Paul's determination to circumcise him. That is, Paul was motivated by Jewish perceptions and sensibilities, not what he regarded to be appropriate for Timothy himself now that he discerned the spiritual meaning of circumcision. Most importantly, *his concern with the Jews was tied directly to the matter of Timothy's impending involvement in the ministry of the gospel*. Paul determined to circumcise Timothy when he realized that he and his uncircumcised condition were well-known throughout the region. But even then, it only became an issue after he decided that Timothy should accompany him and Silas in their labors in the gospel.

- 2) A second option is the better one. This view holds that Paul’s decision to circumcise Timothy was in keeping with his overall philosophy of ministry articulated in his first Corinthian epistle (ref. 9:19-23). So far from contradicting the council’s decree and compromising the gospel, Timothy’s circumcision was an act of submission and service to it.

The Jerusalem Council had determined that single-minded devotion to Christ – renouncing every form and expression of idolatry – is the sole criterion for being saved. Alongside the more obvious implications, this means forsaking the personal idols of rights, liberties, privileges and preferences for the sake of Christ and His gospel; *it means becoming all things to all men in order to win them to Him*. Christ doesn’t demand circumcision, but He does demand absolute devotion and faithful, yielded service. Where circumcision serves these ends, it fully satisfies the criterion set out by the council under the leading of the Holy Spirit.

- e. The Jewish people were a central concern in Paul’s gospel ministry; though many repudiated him and the Savior he proclaimed, he persevered in taking the gospel to his “kinsmen according to the flesh.” He understood their unique privilege and calling and did everything in his power to lead them to embrace the One they had long awaited – the One at the very center of their sacred history (cf. Romans 9:1-5, 10:1-3 with Acts 16:11-13, 17:1-3, 10-11, 16-17, 18:1-5, 19, 19:1-8, 28:16-31).

Paul was committed to preaching Christ to the Jews, and he was determined to remove every stumbling block to their faith. When he learned that Timothy’s uncircumcised condition was common knowledge among the Jews of that area, he realized that Timothy’s presence with him would be detrimental to his labors (at least in the Lycaonian region). More than simply distracting a Jewish audience from the claims of the gospel, Timothy’s uncircumcision would prevent Paul and Silas from even gaining a hearing with them. No synagogue would open its doors to Timothy, and even a Jew on the street would refuse to associate with him.

Paul was in full agreement with the Jerusalem Council’s ruling that Gentile believers have no need to be circumcised. For Jew and Gentile alike, circumcision is nothing; the only thing that matters is a new creation, and throughout the course of his ministry Paul stood against those who argued otherwise. *But precisely because circumcision itself is nothing, it is free to be the servant of that which is of infinite value and importance.*

This explains Paul’s apparent inconsistency: He opposed the notion that circumcision has any worth or merit, but he recognized its value in serving the cause of the gospel. In that way he stood with the council both in denying the need for Gentiles to be circumcised and in upholding their obligation of absolute devotion to God in Christ. Timothy’s circumcision had nothing to do with *him* and everything to do with serving Christ and His gospel with his whole life and in every way available to him. He, like Paul, would become all things to all men for the sake of their salvation. This was the lesson the knife afforded to Timothy; this was the lesson that prepared him for the ministry of the gospel.