

The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it – but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”

Vance Havner

Text

Acts 15:22-41

Topic

The church arrived at a united opinion about what was necessary in order to be saved. But when Paul and Barnabas decided to go back to the churches they established with the good news, they divided over whether or not to take Jon-Mark with them.

Title

United We Stand, Divided We Sprawl

Acts 15:22 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, *namely*, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.

Acts 15:23 They wrote this *letter* by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

Acts 15:24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "*You must* be circumcised and keep the law" - to whom we gave no *such* commandment -

Acts 15:25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

Acts 15:26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 15:27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth.

Acts 15:28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things:

Acts 15:29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

Acts 15:30 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter.

Acts 15:31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.

Acts 15:32 Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words.

Acts 15:33 And after they had stayed *there* for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles.

Acts 15:34 However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there.

Acts 15:35 Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

Acts 15:36 Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, *and see* how they are doing."

Acts 15:37 Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark.

Acts 15:38 But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work.

Acts 15:39 Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus;

Acts 15:40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God.

Acts 15:41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Introduction

There's a saying that's been around the church for at least five centuries. Its intent is to promote unity by keeping peace among believers. It goes like this: *In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity (love).*

There are certain essentials that all believers must agree upon. The deity of Jesus Christ; His virgin birth; His incarnation as fully human yet fully God; His physical resurrection from the dead. These cannot ever be compromised.

There are always going to be nonessentials. Style of worship is a good example of a nonessential. It changes with the times and it reflects various cultural and generational differences among people.

Whether we disagree about essentials or nonessentials we should do it with love. That's not to say we are 'soft' when folks deny the essential doctrines of Christianity. It's to say we love them too much to not correct them from the Bible.

One essential doctrine in our text is that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. There is no room for adding good works of any kind. Any person or group that adds good works is presenting another Gospel, a false gospel.

One nonessential in our text is who to take with you on a mission's trip.

Paul and Barnabas were united on the essential but sharply divided over the nonessential. It is recorded in the Bible as one of those real moments that doesn't sugar-coat the difficulties of getting along with one another within the church.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Your Church Is Strengthened When There Is Accord Among Believers, and #2 Your Church Need Not Be Weakened When There Is Discord Among Believers.

#1 Your Church Is Strengthened
When There Is Accord Among Believers
(v22-32)

Certain men from the church at Jerusalem had traveled to the church at Antioch to tell the Gentile believers they must also be circumcised and keep the customs of Moses. In other words, salvation was by grace through faith, *plus works*.

Paul and Barnabas and a few others from Antioch traveled back to Jerusalem with these troublemakers to meet with the apostles and elders of the church.

We looked at the meeting in our last study. They determined to tell Gentiles that God was definitely not putting any burden upon them of converting to Judaism and keeping the customs of Moses. Salvation was, and is, by grace alone through faith alone.

Our text continues with the report of the meeting being taken back to Antioch.

Acts 15:22 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, *namely*, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.

Men claiming authority from the apostles and elders at Jerusalem had been the source of the misinformation. The leaders thus determined to send two guys who really did have their authority.

Acts 15:23 They wrote this *letter* by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

Acts 15:24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "*You must* be circumcised and keep the law" - to whom we gave no *such* commandment -

Acts 15:25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

Acts 15:26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a mention that Barnabas and Paul **risked their lives** for the sake of Jesus Christ. It was in recognition of their calling and of their faithfulness to their calling.

Ministers and missionaries still risk their lives in certain parts of the world. Those that do not have often sacrificed lives they may have lived in order to serve the Lord.

The point isn't that we should glorify ministers and missionaries. The point is that when there is a decision to be made or a dispute to be resolved we might want to put more weight on what these men say. Or, at the very least, give them the benefit of the doubt.

Acts 15:27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth.

Acts 15:28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit... Those seven words are incredibly important. This was not a human decision. A group of guys didn't get together and invent the Christian religion. God Himself revealed the truth about salvation. The leaders and the laity simply acknowledge what was true.

There **are** definite essentials of the Christian faith! They were not invented by men but are revealed by God in His Word.

Acts 15:28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things:

Acts 15:29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

These suggestions were not theological but sociological. Gentiles need not offend Jews socially by flaunting their cultural differences as liberties they enjoyed.

Acts 15:30 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter.

Acts 15:31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.

There were no additional burdens, no obstacles, to their enjoying a personal relationship with God. Often in our zeal to help others we add things to the Gospel. It's important that we encourage one another to continue in the grace of God.

Acts 15:32 Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words.

In the first century, before we had the completed Bible, God spoke authoritatively through men who held the office of prophet. There is no office of prophet today. There is the gift of prophecy which, when exercised, is to be judged against the standard of the Bible.

The Bible warns that winds of false and misleading doctrines will blow through the church. It tells of the doctrines of demons. Thus it is so important we are in one accord in the essentials.

Correct, orthodox Bible doctrine causes you to rejoice. It gives you a clear picture of the person and nature of God. We add or subtract from the essentials at great risk.

#2 Your Church Need Not Be Weakened
When There Is Discord Among Believers
(v33-41)

The church at Antioch had been nearly wrecked by the false doctrine of the Judaizing teachers from Jerusalem. After hearing the report from Jerusalem they were back on track.

The problem they would next face was with a nonessential issue. There are lots of nonessential issues. People are not always going to agree on them. In fact, they will often have sharp disagreement. It's to be expected.

Acts 15:33 And after they had stayed *there* for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles.

Acts 15:34 However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there.

Acts 15:35 Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

They got back to the spiritual business of the church. We know from earlier studies that the leaders in Antioch prayed and fasted over direction and decisions. The Holy Spirit released the delegation from Jerusalem to return. He led Silas to remain. Paul and Barnabas went back to **teaching and preaching the word of the Lord**. **Many others** were receiving gifts to minister as well.

It's necessary for everyone to be on the same page with regard to doctrine. It's nice when everyone is on the same page with regard to ministry. Nonessentials are not essential but it makes more sense for everyone to be working together to implement the Holy Spirit's direction for the church.

There will, however, always be moments of discord among brothers and sisters. We don't hear God perfectly and sometimes have very different ideas about how to implement the Holy Spirit's direction for the church.

Discord rang-out in Antioch:

Acts 15:36 Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, *and see* how they are doing."

Acts 15:37 Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark.

Acts 15:38 But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work.

The Gentiles in the churches Paul and Barnabas had established needed to hear the good news that salvation was by grace alone through faith alone. Paul began planning a mission. He invited Barnabas to go with him and re-visit the churches they had established.

Barnabas was all for it. At some point in the planning phase Paul found out that Barnabas was **determined to take with them John called Mark**. Luke reminded us that Jon-Mark had abruptly deserted them on the first mission's trip.

Paul was disinclined to acquiesce to Barnabas' request. Paul said, "No."

Barnabas, true to his big spiritual heart, probably wanted to encourage his young cousin by giving him another chance. Paul, true to his big spiritual vision, did not want to be hindered by someone who had proven unfaithful.

I'll bet if we polled the audience we'd be split over who was right. I know the commentators are split. Some go so far as to suggest Paul was acting in a very selfish, uncaring, un-Christlike manner.

Neither man was right or wrong because this was a nonessential issue of ministry. I can understand Barnabas wanting to give Jon-Mark a second chance. But I can totally relate with Paul that a second chance didn't mean Jon-Mark needed to go on their second mission and prove himself a liability.

For me, I'm with Paul. The priority was the mission, not the man. Paul faced the prospect of beatings, imprisonments, and stonings. He didn't need to be concerned about holding Jon-Mark's hand.

This very thing is often the cause of discord in the church. Some put priority on the mission; others on the man. Why should the bigger mission suffer just to encourage one man or a small group of men and women? But, at the same time, isn't the Lord interested in the one man?

Acts 15:39 Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another...

These are strong words of disagreement. It doesn't mean they were raising their voices, yelling at one another, or causing a scene. But it does mean that they could not and would not agree on the proper way to conduct this second mission. There was no reasonable amount of time they could wait in order to reach an accord. The more time they waited the less likely the mission would occur. The Gentiles in the outlying regions desperately needed to hear the word from Jerusalem and be strengthened.

There will always be disagreement within the church on exactly how to conduct our mission. It's unavoidable. But it need not cripple us the way doctrinal disagreement does. Ministry must go forward.

Acts 15:39 Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus;

Acts 15:40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God.

Acts 15:41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Instead of one mission there would be two. Is this what the Holy Spirit intended all along? I'd say "No." But God is not to be thwarted by our discord. He can use conflict. He can work despite conflict.

I 'side' with Paul but I can't say that Barnabas was wrong. I do see that Paul and Silas were **commended by the brethren** for their journey while there is no corresponding commendation for the Barnabas and Jon-Mark team. I can say that Barnabas is not mentioned again in the Book of Acts.

I'm quick to add that as you read through the New Testament you find that these three men were all involved with one another in later years. Their discord over the "how-to" of ministry was not a cause for them to break fellowship.

There are a lot of ways of doing ministry and missions. They are nonessentials but that doesn't mean they are not important. We often feel very passionate about them.

It's better for the church for there to be one accord even in the nonessentials. When there is discord, I suggest we try to get an accord. If we can't, then let's follow the leaders. Among the leaders, let's defer to those most invested in the ministry – the men who have risked (or in most modern cases, sacrificed) their lives for the sake of the ministry.

Let's never allow discord to weaken the church either internally or in its mission to those outside.

[Story: Summer concerts @ CC San Bernardino...]

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