



The Book of Acts - Chapter Fifteen

Summary of Chapter Fifteen

The peace of the Antioch church was shattered by conservative Jewish Christians, probably of the Pharisaic tradition or perhaps priestly descendents of Aaron, who had travelled to Antioch and started proclaiming to the Gentile converts that they cannot be saved unless they also observed the Law of Moses. Although Paul, Barnabas and others strongly contested this with them, it caused a great deal of unrest and so it was decided to send Paul and Barnabas to the church in Jerusalem to resolve the issue.

A meeting, which later became known as the Jerusalem Council, was attended by elders, apostles and other church leaders. The issues were fully debated, with each side having the chance to put their case. Peter spoke strongly of his experience with Gentiles at Cornelius' house, a decade or so earlier, and how the Holy Spirit had been poured out on Gentiles, with no attempt made to Judaize the Gentiles first. The church in Jerusalem fully supported this at the time. Paul defended Peter, then he and Barnabas gave a briefly reported description of all they had seen, both at Antioch and during their recent missionary journey through many Gentile regions.

Probably after further debate, the apostle James, the younger brother of the Lord, proposed a solution that was fully accepted by the church, and which should not offend Jewish Christians, but would also place no unnecessary burden on Gentile Christians either. A letter was written recommending Gentile churches to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, blood products in their food and from sexual immorality.

Two men from the Jerusalem church, Judas and Silas, were chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch to deliver the letter to the Gentile churches there and further afield, probably through copies made at Antioch to be delivered onward by local men. This letter was received with great joy at Antioch, helping to heal any wounds and forming a bond between the two sister churches.

After a while, Paul proposed a second missionary journey to revisit the churches they had planted on their first journey, and he invited Barnabas to again accompany him. Barnabas agreed but wanted to take his nephew John Mark with them. But Mark had left them part way through the last journey and Paul felt it inappropriate to take him along. This was the cause of a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, who took Mark with him and sailed to Cyprus. Paul chose Silas and headed, on foot, for Derbe on the start of another epic adventure.

VI Acts 15:1-35 - The Jerusalem Council

A conference was held in Jerusalem to discuss conditions for Gentile membership in the church. General consensus is that it was held sometime between AD48-52, with many commentators preferring an earlier date, circa AD49, to allow it to have occurred chronologically in Acts between Paul's first and second missionary journeys. This would also allow Paul to be in Corinth in the early 50's AD, when Governor Gallio was known to be in office.

The issue was raised by the Pharisaic wing of the Jerusalem church (vv.1-5); the Gentile mission was defended by Peter (vv.6-11); a solution was proposed by James (vv.12-21); and an official agreement was reached (vv.22-35). The fact that James was key to the resolution shows that the Jewish and Gentile believers were less divided than some try to make them. Those who complained here were on the fringe of the church, and their hard line view was soundly rejected.

VI.a Acts 15:1-21 - The council at Jerusalem

VI.a.i Acts 15:1-5 - The circumcision party criticises the Gentile mission

The Antioch church had reached out to many Gentiles (Acts 11:20-21), and God had given Paul and Barnabas great success amongst the Gentiles on their recent mission (Acts 14:27). No evidence exists that these Gentiles had been circumcised or required to live by the Mosaic Law. In fact, the Spirit had come on them without any such act, as Peter argued. Some conservative Jewish Christians contended that Gentiles should undergo these things, since they were required of all converts to Judaism. The issue was whether Gentiles needed to become Jews and follow Jewish ceremonial laws, in order to become Christians. Though some scholars think that Paul is referring to this meeting in Galatians 2:1-10, it is better to see that passage as referring to private contacts made during his famine relief visit to Jerusalem (see comments made on Acts 11:27-30).

¹ Some men came down from Judæa to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

Acts 15:1

Some men. These were probably either men of the Pharisaic tradition or perhaps priests, who had come to faith but were still deeply embedded in their traditions.

There is nothing in the teachings of Jesus that says circumcision or any other aspect of the Law of Moses was a prerequisite for salvation.

The Jewish law contained not only basic moral provisions but many aspects of a more ceremonial nature, such as circumcision, the kosher food laws, and many requirements involving external purity and various kinds of sacrifices and festivals. These laws presented a problem for Gentiles: to live by them would make it virtually impossible to continue in their Gentile communities. But according to the OT, one had to be circumcised to belong to the people of God (Genesis 17:9-14), and it seemed to many of the Jewish Christians, that the church should also require this of male believers. Paul addressed the issue of circumcision in Romans 2:25-29 and 4:9-16, and in Galatians 2:3-5, 5:2-12 and 6:12-15.

Josephus wrote: 'That when Izates, the son of Helen queen of Adiabene, embraced the Jew's religion, Ananias declared he might do it without circumcision; but Eleazar maintained that it was a great impiety to remain uncircumcised', and when two eminent Gentiles fled to Josephus he wrote: 'The zealots among the Jews were urgent for their circumcision; but Josephus dissuaded them from insisting upon it'.

Basically, what these men were saying was: 'you must become Jews before we will accept you into Christian fellowship'. Such has been the difference in all ages between bigotry and tolerance.

² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ³ The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.

Acts 15:2-3

Paul and Barnabas would not yield to their demands and debated vigorously and publically with them. Finally, they agreed to bring the issue to the church in Jerusalem: <<They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God>> (3 John 1:6).

Although their journey was urgent, they took the time to visit many churches in Phoenicia and Samaria en route, in order to encourage them with the information of how the Gentiles were being converted by the work of the Holy Spirit.

⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

Acts 15:4

The apostles and elders would play a significant role in steering the forthcoming debate but it would be a whole church resolution that was passed.

But before business began, they made a full report of what God had done through them in their recent journey through Cyprus and modern-day Turkey, as it would set the tone for the business in hand.

⁵ Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

Acts 15:5

Those from the Pharisees were likely the same group as those insisting on circumcision in v.2 and Acts 11:2 <<So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him>>. They not only argued that Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved, but also that they were required to obey the whole Law of Moses as well, for circumcision represented a commitment to observe the law.

The NT makes no reference to observing the Mosaic Law but instead says: <<Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household>> (Acts 16:31), <<Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins>> (Acts 2:38), and: <<everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved>> (Joel 2:32, Acts 2:21 and Romans 10:13). What the circumcision group were saying was: 'Grace and salvation cannot save, only circumcision in the flesh can'.

It is not for us to make preconditions for others: <<who say, 'Keep away; don't come near me, for I am too sacred for you!' Such people are smoke in my nostrils, a fire that keeps

burning all day>> (Isaiah 65:5), <<The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him>> (Romans 14:3), and Peter acknowledges all people in the opening address of his second letter: <<Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours>> (2 Peter 1:1).

VI.a.ii Acts 15:6-11 - Peter defends Paul

Peter was the first to speak and he defended Paul's Gentile mission.

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

Acts 15:6

The apostles and the elders provided the main leadership at the council, but v.22 indicates that the whole church was present for the occasion and apparently also gave consent to the decision.

It was not just a meeting of the apostles nor did they lord it over others in the church, reminding us that: <<Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them">> (Matthew 20:25).

⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

Acts 15:7

After much discussion. This important theological issue in the early history of the church was not decided by a sudden decree spoken by a prophet, but by careful reasoning and thoughtful argumentation based on scripture.

Peter's reference to the Gentiles hearing the Gospel from my lips some time ago refers to his witness at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:34-43), circa AD38, 10 years or so before the Jerusalem Council.

It would appear that the issue had been fully and openly discussed, with both sides having their say before Peter spoke. He was no longer the main spokesman but offered clear and wise counsel as one filled with the Holy Spirit. He reminded them of the acceptance they gave of his teaching to the Gentiles (Acts 11:18), and they had not compelled Cornelius' group to undergo circumcision or be under any other constraint, as the Holy Spirit had been freely given to them by God as it had been to the Jewish converts. Why then should the converts who had heard Paul or anyone else so gifted to preach the true Gospel?

Peter recalls that the yoke of the ceremonial law was something that the nation historically had failed to keep and so had their generation. The law of God was perfect but man was fallible.

⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

Acts 15:8-9

God, who knows the heart, does not judge people the way humans judge each other: <<He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows

your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight" >> (Luke 16:15). He will accept all those who genuinely turn to him through Jesus.

Through the grace of God, Jesus had poured out the Holy Spirit on the believing Jews at Pentecost, and the same Spirit had been given to Cornelius' household. Therefore, Peter concluded that saving grace is for all mankind, not just for the Jews.

Peter's reference to God having purified their hearts by faith may allude to the content of his vision prior to visiting Cornelius (see v.7): << Do not call anything impure that God has made clean>> (Acts 10:15 and 11:9). The faith of the Gentiles at Cornelius's house is only implicit in Acts Chapters 10-11, but Peter referred to it explicitly here: they were saved by faith in their hearts, not by circumcision in their flesh. The argument here recalls points made in Acts 11:15-17 <<" As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" >>.

¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Acts 15:10-11

The rabbis often used the metaphor of a yoke with reference to the law, and Peter's reference to yoke here refers not just to circumcision but to the whole of the Mosaic Law, see comments made on v.1. By speaking of the law as an unbearable yoke, Peter was not denying that the law was God's gift to Israel. Rather, he was arguing that Israel was unable to fulfil it perfectly and that salvation could not be obtained through the law, see Romans 2:17-24. Only one means of salvation exists for both Jew and Gentile: God's grace (v.11) through Jesus Christ our Lord. Paul also refers to any requirement to keep the OT laws as: <<a yoke of slavery>> (Galatians 5:1b). By contrast, Jesus calls people to take his new yoke upon them, a yoke that is easy: <<Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls>> (Matthew 11:29).

A yoke was the wooden frame joining two animals, usually oxen, for pulling heavy loads, and it was a metaphor for one person's subjection to another, and a common metaphor in Judaism for the law. The Pharisaic interpretation of the law, with its extensive list of proscriptions, had become a crushing burden but was believed by the people to be of divine origin. Jesus' yoke of discipleship, on the other hand, brings rest through simple commitment to him: <<This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome>> (1 John 5:3).

VI.a.iii Acts 15:12-21 - James proposes a solution

When some of the apostles had begun to leave Jerusalem for a wider witness, the Jerusalem leadership was assumed by others, with Jesus' brother James taking a prominent role, see Acts 12:17 and 21:18-25. At the Jerusalem Council, James endorsed Peter's conclusions about a circumcision-free Gentile mission, and offered a suggestion for establishing fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³ When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me.

Acts 15:13

Regarding Barnabas and Paul, Luke saw no need to repeat what was written in the foregoing chapters. At other times, he does give repetitions, e.g. Peter's account of the Gentiles being clean, and Paul's account of his encounter with the Risen Lord.

They listened to Peter first, then to Barnabas and Paul attentively. The theoretical arguments had come and gone, followed by actual accounts:

- In science, there is nothing like a proven experiment.
- In law, there is nothing like an adjudged case.
- In God's economy, there is nothing like a personal witness testimony: <<Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me>> (Psalm 66:16).

James was noted for his scrupulous keeping of the Jewish law (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 20.200; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.23).

¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.

Acts 15:14

Simeon is a different spelling for the name of Simon Peter in several translations. James presented scriptural backing (vv.15-17) to support Peter's contention that God was now including the Gentiles as a people for himself, as we call upon his name and his name represents all that is true about him and his character, and also seems to imply 'for his reputation and his glory'.

¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ " 'After this I will return
and rebuild David's fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,

¹⁷ that the remnant of men may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things'

¹⁸ that have been known for ages.

Acts 15:16-18

James referred to prophets (v.15), showing that he could have appealed to more than one OT text to defend the inclusion of Gentiles by faith alone. See the allusion to Isaiah 45:21 in v.18: <<Declare what is to be, present it – let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is none but me>>, and the context of the Isaiah prophecy. James concentrated on Amos 9:11-12, which looked to the time when God would restore the house of David. Luke provides the Septuagint, i.e. Greek translation of the text, which speaks of the Gentiles, Greek ethnē, seeking the Lord. But even the Masoretic, i.e. Hebrew Text, fits with what James argued, since it speaks of a people who bear by my name (Amos 9:12), and those called by God's name are in a saving relationship with him. Amos looked to the time when God would claim a people for himself from among the Gentiles. James concurred with Peter that the time of Gentile inclusion in God's people had now arrived.

The promise may be to the Gentiles but it remains for Israel too: <<Afterward shall the children of Israel return, and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and shall fear the Lord and his goodness in the latter days>> (Hosea 3:5), and: <<But they shall serve the Lord their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up unto them>> (Jeremiah 30:9).

¹⁹ "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

Acts 15:19-21

James agreed with Peter that they should not make it difficult for the Gentiles with the ritual laws. But he knew that Gentile Christians would have contact with Jewish Christians, who still kept the ceremonial provisions, including laws about sacrifices, festivals, unclean foods, and circumcision. He offered a proposal by which Gentile Christians could have fellowship with Jewish Christians and avoid giving unnecessary offense.

The word for, Greek gar, at the beginning of v.21 gives the reason for James's proposal: Gentile Christians should abstain from certain things because in every city there were still Jews who observed these ceremonial laws and thought them to be important.

The first three requirements seem to be contextually sensitive and designed for these specific circumstances: abstention from food offered to idols, from blood, i.e. meat with the blood in it, and from strangled meat, which would also have blood in it. But Paul in other circumstances permitted believers to eat food offered to idols; see 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1.

Jehovah Witnesses refuse medical treatment involving the giving or receiving of blood products, based on this text, which they have clearly misinterpreted.

The fourth requirement, which dealt with sexual immorality, is of course not a contextual or optional standard of obedience, like the other three. It may have needed special emphasis and clarification because many Gentiles' consciences were so corrupted that they did not hold to a high standard of sexual purity. This reaffirmation of the believer's need to maintain sexual purity also serves as a reminder that the moral standards of the OT still need to be obeyed, especially today, where many use the argument 'times have changed'.

James concluded his appeal (v.21) by noting the widespread, i.e. in every city, teaching and affirmation of the Law of Moses, thus suggesting that there was no need to give unnecessary offense either to Jewish believers or to unbelieving Jews, who might otherwise consider becoming Christians in the future.

VI.b Acts 15:22-35 - The council's letter to Gentile believers

When the entire assembly had agreed to James's provisions, a letter was drafted to inform the Antioch church of their decision and it was then taken first to the church at Antioch.

²² Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers.

Acts 15:22

Decided to choose. Mature Christian wisdom and reasoning, in dependence on the Lord, resulted in a unanimous corporate decision. See also v.28. The letter was accompanied by representatives of the Jerusalem church, who could testify to the reasoning that the consensus expressed. This in no way undermined the integrity of Paul and Barnabas as witnesses, who could just as easily have taken the letter back by themselves, but these witnesses would help to establish a common bond between the mainly Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem and its mainly Gentile sister in Antioch.

Nothing more is known of Judas called Barsabbas, but Silas soon became Paul's missionary companion (v.40). Silas is a shortened form of the Greek name Silvanus, the name by which he is known in the NT epistles in some translations, e.g. ASV, Darby, ESV, KJ, see 2 Corinthians 1:19, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:1 and 1 Peter 5:12 in those translations.

Many commentators believe that Judas was the brother of Joseph or Justus Barsabbas, who had apostolic candidature in Acts 1:23.

²³ With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,
To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:
Greetings.

Acts 15:23

Your brothers clearly indicates the affirmation of fellowship that was to be established between these sister churches.

The Roman province of Syria included Cilicia, with Antioch as its provincial capital.

²⁴ We have heard that some went out from us without our authorisation and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said.

Acts 15:24

Without our authorisation makes a clear statement that what these men had been proclaiming had no apostolic authority or affirmation and could be disregarded.

Troubling your minds showed concern for the upset these men had caused and confirmed that those insisting that Gentile converts should be circumcised did not represent the Jerusalem leadership nor had their approval, see vv.1-2 and v.5.

Paul probably had men like these in mind when he wrote to the Galatians: <<Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh>> (Galatians 6:12-13).

²⁵ So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul — ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸ It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

Acts 15:28

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. The apostles and elders were confident that the Holy Spirit had guided their decision making process.

Leaders are to give proper guidance as they are led by the Holy Spirit but they must only ever impose God's ways and recommend best practice for our lifestyles. They must never impose their own rules to test the obedience of their congregations to them nor should the people ever refuse to allow proper advice for the sole reason of opposing their leaders. We should all adhere to sound Gospel teaching.

Judas and Silas to confirm gives authorisation to these men to speak on behalf of the Jerusalem church, which the men in v.1 did not have.

Not to burden you. They were not requiring circumcision and observance of the entire Mosaic Law (v.10), for salvation is by grace alone (v.11).

²⁹ You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

Acts 15:29

Meat of strangled animals would still have blood in them and must not be eaten both as a command and as a matter of health.

Hygiene laws also prevented animals that had died naturally, and were subsequently found, to be avoided as they posed a health hazard. This was also something that formed the last of the seven precepts of the sons of Noah, where they could not eat the limb torn from a live animal.

You will do well to avoid these things makes the letter a recommendation rather than an instruction that is first implied by you are to abstain, giving the Antioch church autonomy over its own decision making but clearly stating sound doctrinal recommendation worthy of implementation.

³⁰ The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. ³¹ The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. ³² Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.

Acts 15:32

Went down to Antioch. Jerusalem is built on the top of a high hill, with the temple built on its highest point, having the rest of the city below it. People are always said to go up to Jerusalem and down from Jerusalem to anywhere else. For example, in the Parable of the Good Samaritan: <<In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead">> (Luke 10:30).

Prophets were gifted to speak what the Holy Spirit revealed to them, here resulting in encouragement and strength. See comments made on Acts 13:1. It also strengthened the bond between the two churches to know that such prominent men were chosen as their representatives.

how they are doing.”³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them,

Acts 15:37

Let us go back. His idea is not to break new ground but to go to an established vineyard to see how it is flourishing: <<Let us go early to the vineyards to see if the vines have budded, if their blossoms have opened, and if the pomegranates are in bloom – there I will give you my love>> (Song 7:12). We sometimes need to ensure that we are fully supporting the existing ministries before establishing new ones without missing opportunities to serve by doing so.

Paul said let us visit the brothers rather than leaders or elders as we are all equal in Christ and share the one father in heaven: <<And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven>> (Matthew 23:9).

For Paul to visit the places he had planted would invigorate him when he sees the answer to his prayers, and it would also allow him to judge if he had been labouring in vain: <<For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless. But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you>> (1 Thessalonians 3:5-6). However, his primary purpose for visiting would be to encourage the churches, ensure they were doing what was right, correcting them in anything they were doing in error, and generally doing everything he could to strengthen them as churches that were focused on preaching the good news of Jesus as the Risen Christ. Disciples, as well as apostles, should be just as satisfied in serving those already in the faith; in just the same way as they are at gathering new converts. Both roles are important and neither should be neglected. However, it is being obedient to the Holy Spirit and using the gifts we are given that should determine what work we do, and how, when and where we do it.

John, also called Mark. We encountered Mark in Jerusalem and during the first part of Paul and Barnabas’ missionary journey.

He was the nephew of Barnabas and his mother Mary held a church meeting at her house in Jerusalem. Church tradition generally accepts Mark as the author of the second Gospel. He will later serve very successfully with both Paul and Peter.

³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus,

Acts 15:39

A sharp disagreement. In the sovereignty of God, out of this disagreement came a doubling of their labour, for Barnabas went to strengthen the churches in Cyprus and Paul went to the churches in Syria, Cilicia and Galatia. In addition, both of their assistants, Mark and Silas, went on to have significant ministries themselves. This is the last mention of Barnabas in the NT but he is accepted as a remarkable man and faithful servant of the Lord and his church.

In many ways, this seems a very disagreeable and sad episode in the life of the early church, and it is easy to stand back and see right and wrong on both sides. Barnabas was Mark’s uncle; he clearly liked the young man and saw the potential in him that he would later fulfil. Paul worked on the premise that if you choose a man once for service and he lets you down that is his fault. If you choose him a second time and he lets you down again,

that is your fault. The words of Solomon might be a little unkind in this instance: <<Like a bad tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in times of trouble>> (Proverbs 25:19). Although speaking here of his imprisonment, other difficulties in life could also apply to these words by Paul: <<Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel>> (Philippians 1:12).

Barnabas was clearly of a forgiving nature and wanted to show forgiveness and reconciliation, which is what is expected by the Lords teaching, and Paul should have followed his instruction: <<Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times>> (Matthew 18:21-22), but Paul also knew the difficulties and trials they would face on such a journey and didn't think it right to subject Mark to those at this time, as it might have caused him permanent damage to fail a second time.

It was probably this separation that led Mark back to Peter and allowed him to write his Gospel. He was probably referred to as Peter's son because of the relationship they then shared: <<She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark>> (1 Peter 5:13). Mark is also reputed to have founded the church in Alexandria, Egypt.

Paul would later write: <<And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose>> (Romans 8:28), and God used this very situation to set up two great ministry teams, working in two different harvest fields, instead of just one as noted before.

Paul would later be reconciled to Mark and writes fondly of him: <<My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him)>> (Colossians 4:10), and in his final letter: <<Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry>> (2 Timothy 4:11).

⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Acts 15:41

Silas and Paul's route took them, by foot, to the churches of Syria and Cilicia, and then to those of his first missionary journey in reverse order, before being called to Macedonia, then travelling south through Berea to Athens and Corinth. Following eighteen very successful and productive months in Corinth, Paul returned to Antioch via Ephesus and Jerusalem.

Commended by the brothers. Some commentators make an issue that the church sent Paul and Silas away with their blessing, but Barnabas and Mark did not have such a recommendation for their ministry, due to the absence of a similar clause in v.39. However, this is probably overstating the case and there is no reason for the church to take such an attitude just because of the disagreement the two men had just had.