

Second Missionary Journey: Preparation Part 1, Disagreement (Acts 15:35-6:5)

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Introduction

1. The providential timing of the Jerusalem Council. The increased numbers of Gentiles coming to Christ and the westward expansion of the gospel place a huge strain on the Jewish Christians who saw themselves better Jews due to their faith in Christ. Their customs had not changed, but now Gentile conversions reached the tipping point when the church will now become characteristically Gentile. The Jews needed to understand and accept God's will in the matter.
2. The work in Antioch strengthened and encouraged. An extended period of teaching and preaching the Word came after the circumcision issue was finally settled. God was now ready to launch the second missionary expansion.
3. This period is probably the setting for Peter's trip to Antioch (Galatians 2:11, 12). This is particularly significant in that Paul sharply rebuked Peter for his inconsistency in the matter of Jew and Gentile relationships. Peter should have known better, especially his having recently participated in the Jerusalem Council. The dissension was sharp to the point that even Barnabas got carried away with the dispute. Paul's confronting the issue obviously resulted in peace and unity among them. It also helps us understand the disagreement with Paul and Barnabas over John Mark. It is very possible that John Mark was with Peter when he came to Antioch and stayed with his uncle when Peter returned to Jerusalem.
4. The preparations for the second effort at gospel expansion
 - a. Silas is introduced as a prophet and teacher sent from Jerusalem with Judas Barsabbas to teach and explain the requirements imposed on the Gentile churches in the letter from the council. Acts 15:34 lacks the best textual support. It was probably added to explain how he went with Paul on the second trip. Verse 33 would indicate that he returned with Judas.
 - b. Paul's desire to go with Barnabas in order to revisit the churches they had established on the first trip (v. 36). It does not appear that they planned to go into new territory at this point, but the Spirit will direct them into Europe for the first time (Acts 16:5-10).
 - c. John Mark is re-engaged into the ministry (v. 37). He becomes the object of a sharp disagreement (Gk.: *paroxusmos*, "an incitement"—source of our English, *paroxysm*; used only twice in the NT; here and Hebrews 10:24—"provoke unto love and good works") between Paul and Barnabas that will result in separation. Paul takes Silas and returns to Galatia through Syria and Cilicia; Barnabas takes John Mark and returns to Cyprus.
5. Two very interesting and troubling texts occur in this passage: the disagreement just cited (15:38) and the circumcision of Timothy (6:3). These events are particularly interesting in the context of the Jerusalem letter and both have a definite connection to it. It is my opinion that Luke writes of them because of the relationship with the theme of the letter.

We will deal with the disagreement this week and Timothy's circumcision next week.

I. A Troubling Text

1. The intensity of the dispute and the question of who was right and who was wrong

- a. It seems that Paul had a very strong opinion of the worth of John Mark as a missionary worker. Barnabas wanted to re-engage him in the work of the gospel; however Paul disagreed. Paul points to Mark's deserting (the Greek term used here) the missionary work at Perga and returning home to Jerusalem as his reason for his stand. Luke gives us no reason for Mark's departure in Acts 13:13). Many speculate that he lacked the stamina to endure the hardships of the journey. Whatever the reason, Paul did not want to risk his coming with them.
 - b. For centuries, the debate has raged over who was right and who was wrong in the dissention.
 - 1) Some side with Paul, seeing Paul as principled and consistent, thus severe. Mark had proved unworthy. He had put his hand to the plow and looked back. He was no longer fit for the kingdom (Luke 9:62; Proverbs 25:19).
 - 2) Others side with Barnabas, believing that Mark should be given a second chance. Indeed, that second chance was the restoration of Mark.
 - 3) One fact is clear that after a period of time, Mark was restored to Paul's fellowship. Paul commends him in his letter to the Colossians (4:10). In his final letter to Timothy before his death, Paul asks for Mark to come to him, considering him to be very useful in the ministry (2 Timothy 4:11). And, of course, Mark is the author of the Gospel of the Perfect Servant.
 - 4) G. C. Morgan offers a very suggestive clue to Mark's restoration, "Perhaps his moral courage was stiffened by Paul's severity, and confirmed by the tenderness of Barnabas" (*Commentary on Acts*, pg. 370). God providentially used this separation as the means to restore John Mark to usefulness in the kingdom of God.
 - c. The conduct of Paul and Barnabas in this incident seems to be totally out of character to their devotion to Christ and service to the gospel.
 - 1) It certainly seems contrary to the spirit of the Scriptures with respect to the church, which insist on unity and harmony.
 - 2) It paints Paul, on the surface, as a first class hypocrite in light of his many admonitions for believers to be at peace and live harmoniously with each other (Romans 12:18; 14:19; 15:5; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 4:3; Colossians 3:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:13; 1 Timothy 2:22; Hebrews 12:14).
 - 3) Could they not have worked it out and come to a peaceful settlement. I believe that they did just that.
2. The intensity of the dispute and the question of sinful conduct.
- a. Were these servants of Christ sinful in their disagreement over John Mark? This is the typical interpretation as evidenced in the following quotes:
 - 1) A. T. Robertson: "This 'son of consolation' loses his temper in a dispute over his cousin [nephew] and Paul uses sharp words towards his benefactor and friend" (*Word Pictures, III*, p. 241). Robert Hawker, "And thus the Church is taught that the best of men are but men" (Poor Man's Commentary, II, p. 138). "The Lord overruled

in this dissension” (*Bible Knowledge Commentary* on Logos Bible Software, Loc Cite.).

- 2) Was Paul too harsh and hasty in his judgment? Was Barnabas too soft hearted and preferential to his kin? Sinfulness stems from fleshly response to the situations of life. To suggest that Paul was being merely prideful and stubborn is to suggest that the issue was his own personal agenda. Had Mark’s failure somehow interfered with his comfort level in some way—increased his own work-load, or inconvenienced him in some way? Was there a burden on his finances? Whatever one may conclude, in order to accuse either man of sinful conduct, one must first demonstrate sinfulness from a context that is completely silent on the issue.
 - 3) “The servant of the Lord must not strive” (2 Timothy 2:24). Those are Paul’s words of admonition to God servants. Did he not know this principle in his early days at Antioch? Had he only just learned them in his service to Christ? Perhaps there is another view that is in better keeping with the character of Christ. Both these men shared the same heart for Christ and His will. It is true that they were still sinners at best (Acts 14:15), but Christ had captured their hearts and minds for devotion to His service. Paul had no personal agenda to contend for; he had Christ’s agenda.
- b. Although disagreements often arise from sinfulness, it is possible to have differences that arise from convictions of Bible truth firmly fixed in the heart. Godly men of different personalities can and do come to different conclusions based on their convictions. Based on the context, I conclude that both men were sincere and operating on what they saw as best for the kingdom. As we said earlier, Mark’s restoration to usefulness in the ministry was likely due to God’s gracious providential use of both Paul’s severity and Barnabas’ tender concern.

II. A Teaching Moment

1. Luke’s purpose in the account
 - a. To explain why Silas, not Barnabas, was Paul’s travelling companion on the second tour.
 - b. To demonstrate how the Gentile letter was to be applied in difficult cases.
2. The overall context of the passage
 - a. The church was basking in the encouragement of the letter and strengthened by the extended teaching of the prophets from Jerusalem (v. 35).
 - b. The clear providential oversight of the Spirit in the restoration of John Mark under the ministry of Barnabas and the forward progress of the gospel under Paul and Silas.
 - c. The evident blessing of the church in commending Paul and Silas to the grace of God (v. 40).

Thus—

- If the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas was sinful, where was the church to rebuke and correct them?
- Why didn’t Luke address the sinfulness?
- Why did the church commend a sinful Paul the gospel work like they did at the launch of the first tour (Acts 13:3)?

3. The importance of biblical confrontation

a. We confront people every day, but the question is whose agenda drives the confrontation? Ours or His? Note the following principles:

- 1) God uses our daily lives in His redemptive process in both us and those around us.
- 2) We cannot advance our own will and determine to sever God in ministry at the same time. This does not mean that the Lord cannot overrule, but generally, self-absorbed interest does not benefit the kingdom.
- 3) God puts us in relationships to advance His cause for His own glory. He is taking lost, suffering, blind, deceived, self-absorbed, fearful, and rebellious people to mold into the very image of His Son.
- 4) His glory is displayed whenever His children live, work, and relate. Everything belongs to Him.
- 5) We must become “others” oriented. God wants to use us to expose other people’s self-excusing arguments and self-atoning lies in order to help them.
- 6) We need to understand that in all the circumstances of life, change must take place from within, not in the circumstances.
- 7) At the same time, we must constantly be aware that there is an enemy, Satan, who is also working to accomplish his purposes by using plausible lies and well-defined strongholds in our hearts. We need each other to see these things and work to demolish them with God’s truth and power.

b. This is what I believe is involved in this disagreement between Paul and Barnabas.

- 1) Paul saw the wrong direction in John Mark and used rebuke to point it out and lead him to repentance.
- 2) Barnabas took a different tact, but with the same goal.
- 3) John Mark was redeemed because the Lord knew that he needed both approaches.

Application

1. We tend to be sinfully self-protective and, thus, seek to avoid conflict at all costs. We cannot understand that it is our God-given responsibility to rebuke and exhort our fellow believers in the goal of bring each other to the glory of Jesus Christ.
2. We *are* to be tender-hearted and forgiving, but that is often the excuse we use for our own faint-heartedness and cowardice in not confronting obvious sinfulness. After all, we don’t want to appear prideful and judgmental. That would be unloving. But, no, it is unloving to fail to help an erring brother see his sin, confess it, and change for the glory of Christ.
3. It is the glory of Christ that must be our major concern, not our comfort or popularity. We must be willing to suffer abuse if we are to be used of God in our business of ministering to the body of Christ in its edification and building up.