As we come to the end of our study in Acts 15, we reach the end of one era and the subsequent beginning of another one. Paul's first missionary journey had come to an end and the second one was about to commence—but not without heartache. Nevertheless, God's work continued and the gospel marched forward. In fact, historically, the gospel has reached us as the result of this second missionary thrust.

We will consider a brief exposition of this passage and make some very relevant observations and applications to where we are today.

A Missionary's Heart

Our text opens by showing us Paul's missionary heart: "And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.'" (v. 36)

The Context

It may be worthwhile to remind ourselves of the context in which we find our text.

In Acts 13, the local church in Antioch sent two of its leading leaders as missionaries. They had completed their first missionary journey after some eighteen months in Galatia and had returned home.

Back in Antioch, they experienced wonderful fellowship as they recounted how the Lord had used them to proclaim the gospel and make disciples of the Lord Jesus. But it was not long before the church in Antioch faced a gospel challenge. Certain Jews had come to Antioch who taught the need for circumcision in order to be saved. Paul and Barnabas confronted them and sought to correct their mischievous error.

But we know from Galatians 2 that, around this time even Peter and Barnabas became guilty of hypocrisy as they behaved in discriminatory fashion by refusing to eat with Gentile believers. Paul confronted them and they learned their lesson. The gospel was guarded and the church was protected.

The church in Antioch then sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to discuss this matter with the church there. Some believing Pharisees were still confused about salvation and seemed to be promoting salvation by race rather than salvation by grace alone. The apostles and the church leaders met, dialogued, and came to the biblical conclusion that salvation is secured the same way regardless of ethnicity. In other words, in the light of Scripture alone, they concluded that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone.

The Jerusalem apostles, under the leadership of James, decided to send a letter to the predominately Gentile churches informing them that there was no need for them to feel like inferior Christians. They exhorted them to be mindful of the cultural sensitivities of the Jews in their midst and encouraged them to exercise Christian liberty—which, incidentally, does not necessarily mean that we *exercise* our rights but rather that we often *restrain* our rights.

The net result was that there was great harmony both in Jerusalem and throughout the region as Gentile believers received the conclusions of this first church council.

With things pretty well settled in Antioch, Paul, ever the gospel-preaching missionary and evangelist, decided that the time was right for him and Barnabas to head out on their second missionary journey. "Paul is anxious, like a true missionary, to go back to the fields where he has planted the gospel."[1] He had had enough of his furlough!

It should be noted that Paul had a shepherd's heart (all missionaries do), as indicated by the fact that he wanted to first see how the new converts and local churches were doing (v. 36). "The precariousness of the life of new converts in pagan lands is shown in all of Paul's Epistles."[2] Barnabas, no doubt, was supportive of such a suggestion. These men were of one heart and soul when it came to the caring for the flock of God. They were both passionate about the gospel and passionate about the church of God. But though they shared the same passion, they did not share the same outlook when it came to personnel for the task. And this difference of opinion resulted in a division between them; a division, we will see, that was never repaired—at least in the sense of them working together.

A Missionary's Heartache

As we have already noted, Paul and Barnabas found themselves disagreeing over the necessary personnel for the anticipated mission. *"Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus." (vv. 37-39).*

Barnabas was as keen as Paul was to head out again on missionary ministry, but he wanted to take along with them his cousin, John Mark. In fact, some versions have translated Barnabas' desire as: he "was determined" (KJV) to do so. The term speaks of tenacity. He willed it, wished it, and stuck to it. He kept pushing the point—obviously because Paul was as tenaciously against it as Barnabas was for it.

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[1] A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, 6 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1930), 3:239
[2] Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, 3:239-40

Paul's reasoning was simple and understandable. As we saw in Acts 13:13, and as indicated in our present text, John Mark, who had accompanied them on their first missionary journey, had lasted a mere twelve verses before deciding that it was time to go home. We are told nowhere in Scripture *why* Mark returned to Jerusalem, but it is clear from Paul's response here that he interpreted the departure as defection. The word translated "departed" means "to apostatize." Though Mark did not depart from the faith, he did depart from his fellow-workers and obviously Paul saw this as a major character flaw.

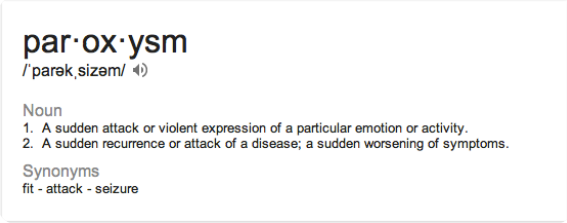
Paul's concern, it appears, was not a personal but rather found its source in principled and practical considerations. He knew that the work of the Great Commission was not for the faint of heart and doubtless was concerned that Mark was, well, faint-hearted. He did not want to take the risk of being diverted from the work of evangelism, disciple-making and church-planting.

It is also possible that, for whatever reason, Paul did not trust John Mark. It has been suggested by many commentators that Mark, being from the church of Jerusalem, may have initially sided with the Judaizers, and therefore Paul may have been suspicious that he might prove to be a problem since their mission was primarily to Gentiles (9:15).

Barnabas, on the other hand, saw things quite differently. The "son of encouragement" (4:36) saw Mark as one who deserved a second chance. Yes, Mark had blown it, but Barnabas doubtless concluded that he should not be judged and characterized by his worst moment. Perhaps Barnabas was persuaded that Mark's Judaistic tendencies (if indeed he had any) had been fully corrected and therefore he should be given another chance.

Was the fact that he was Barnabas' cousin a factor? We don't know. We do know that Barnabas was insistent that he should go with them, and that Paul was insistent that he should not. It all came to a head in v. 39. As Erdman observes, "The more lenient view was taken by Barnabas, who was cousin to Mark and a man of gentle and sympathetic disposition. Paul was animated by his consuming zeal for the great work which he felt should not be imperiled out of regard for individual feelings and preferences."[3]

The text tells us "*there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.*" It would be hard to find sadder words in all of Scripture. The English word "paroxysm," (par – ox – ism) which speaks of a "sharp feeling," is derived from the Greek word translated "contention or disagreement." This was a painful disagreement. And it is one in



[3] Charles R. Erdman, The Acts: An Exposition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), 128

which it is difficult to take sides. "No one can rightly blame Barnabas for giving his cousin John Mark a second chance nor Paul for fearing to risk him again. One's judgment may go with Paul, but one's heart goes with Barnabas."[4]

The fallout was that they parted ways, and as far as Scripture reveals, they were never seen together in ministry again.

It must be stressed that the text does not dwell on who was right and who was wrong. No doubt, both were right in many points. They both had valid concerns. But they could not see their way clear to budge on the conclusion.

It should also be noted that the local church did commend Paul and his new missionary partner (Silas) while no mention is made of this course of approval of Barnabas and Mark. In my opinion, this is significant, for the local church is the last court of appeal in cases of believers who are at loggerheads. Further, since Paul was an apostle—and especially an apostle to the Gentiles—Barnabas ought to have submitted to him. Nevertheless, that is in many ways beside the point. The point is that the text focuses on the providential *fruit* of this discord: two missionary teams instead of one.

> "The incident is to be regretted and must have been distressing to the devoted friends whose lives had been so long intertwined; but it was overruled for the wider extension of the work. . . . The purposes of God cannot be delayed by human frailties."[5]

Before moving on, let us note the sad reality that even godly men—and godly leaders in a church—can sometimes struggle to get along. As Harrison points out, "The mere fact that Luke reported the contention is a sufficient refutation of the charge that he was intent in his work to present an idealized picture of the early church."[6]

Dissension Not Justified

Now, this text should never be used to justify dissension, for there is no justification for this. God did not record this event so that we can make flippant excuses for division. There are numerous New Testament passages which exhort us to like-mindedness, to forbearing one another and to seeking harmony and reconciliation. We must never ignore these exhortations, for as Stott has well said,

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[4] Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, 3:241
[5] Erdman, *The Acts*, 128
[6] Everett F. Harrison, *Interpreting Acts: The Expanding Church* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1986), 259

> "God certainly overruled 'this melancholy agreement' (Calvin), since as a result of it 'out of one pair two were made,' as Bengel commented. But this example of God's providence must not be used as an excuse for Christian quarrelling."[7]

God wants us to be unified. He loves the communion of the saints. However, what we can learn from this is that, for the cause of the Great Commission, for the cause of the glory of God being made known in all of the nations, sometimes we have to live with differences—even to the point of sometimes willingly embracing division. I argue this because the text does not focus on the division of these two men but rather on the direction in which they went to fulfill the duty to which they were called.

It is very significant that these two teams, let by two brothers who were in disagreement, went forth for the cause of Christ. Neither of these men quit the ministry because of the disagreement. Instead, they continued to labor in the Great Commission. And since both of these men were filled with the Spirit, we should conclude that they labored under God's blessing.

> "Yet another of Satan's attempts to hinder the spread of the gospel backfired. Now there were two missionary teams where before there had been one. Their impact had doubled."[8]

It is foolish to think that everyone must be right in every area to be used fruitfully by God. John Wesley and George Whitefield were two men, each used greatly by God, who disagreed on some rather important doctrinal matters. Whitefield was a thoroughgoing Calvinist, while Wesley was an adamant Armenian. The story is told that someone once asked Whitefield whether he believed he would see Wesley in heaven. Whitefield replied that he did not, in fact, think he would see Wesley there. The questioner, himself a Calvinist, agreed heartily, stating that Wesley surely could not be a believer if he denied Reformed doctrine. Correcting the questioner's misunderstanding of his reply, Whitefield said, "He will be so near the eternal throne and we at such a distance, we shall hardly get sight of him."

Personality Clash?

It may also be helpful to note that sometimes there are clashes between leaders and between church members over personalities. It seems clear that these two leaders were very different in their personality type. Such differences are often manifested in how situations are interpreted and in the approaches taken towards making decisions. Though we would do very well to guard against using personality as an excuse in conflict, at the

[7] John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 253.
[8] John F. MacArthur, Jr., Acts: The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 2:82

same time when leaders work together such differences must be taken into account so that, when they disagree, there is not the unwarranted conclusion that one is more "spiritual" or more "Scriptural" than the other.

One final word before we delve into the division of labor: This, as indicated, was very painful. I don't doubt that when they parted ways that there was intense emotion; there no doubt were tears. "Paul and Barnabas parted in anger and both in sorrow. Paul owed more to Barnabas than to any other man. Barnabas was leaving the greatest spirit of the time and of all times."[9]

Don't forget that it was Barnabas who came alongside Paul soon after the Lord saved him to help him to be accepted by the brothers at the church in Jerusalem. This required both great courage and compassion. No wonder he was nicknamed "the son of encouragement."

Again, it was Barnabas who, as it were, rescued Paul from "obscurity" when he hunted for him in Tarsus with the goal of bringing him back to join him in the pastoral team at Antioch.

These brothers labored together for several years. The Lord gave them much fruit and much success in the ministry. They labored together in the defense of the gospel in Jerusalem. But God also had granted them opportunity to suffer together for His name (Philippians 1:29). Perhaps Barnabas tended Paul's wounds when he was stoned and left for dead in Lystra. These men were close. They loved one another. And so when they parted their hearts were no doubt torn asunder.

Division is a fact of church life. It is a painful fact of ministerial life. But when it occurs we must keep our heads and guard our hearts. That is, we must not make unwarranted assumptions about one another and we must not quit serving the Lord. We must persevere in the work of all of God's glory being made known in all the world.

A Missionary's Hope

The closing verses detail the missionary's hope. That is, though there was heartache, their hearts remained focused on something greater than their own problems: Both were hopeful for the furtherance of the gospel.

> *And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. (Acts 15:39-41)*

[9] Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, 3:241

The dissension-producing division of labor introduces us to John Mark again but also to Silas once again (15:22, 32). Barnabas stood by the side of John Mark and they went together, for the gospel, towards Cyprus. As Barclay has noted, "It is impossible to say whether Barnabas or Paul was right. But this much is true, Mark was supremely fortunate in that he had a friend like Barnabas."[10]

It should be noted that Barnabas went in the very direction that Paul had anticipated going when he first made the suggestion that they return and visit the brethren they encountered on their first missionary journey (13:4). Again, this indicates that the work of the gospel did not suffer by this division; both men persevered *in* and *for* the Great Commission.

Equally, Paul was committed to the Great Commission. He would not sit around and lick his wounds; worse still, he would not wait around to defend himself but rather he immediately looked for a gospel partner and he chose Silas. This was a very good choice because Silas was familiar with the Judaistic tendencies in Jerusalem, having also been involved in the council there. This would be a diplomatic advantage when dealing with tough-minded Jews they might encounter. Further he was also apparently fluent in Greek since he taught the Hellenistic church in Antioch. In addition to this he was also a prophet (v. 32), which would prove to be a valuable gift for the proclamation of the gospel.

We can learn from this that: **The Lord does not halt His work because of conflict amongst His workers. His purpose is too important to be thwarted by sinners.**

Paul and Silas, being commended by the church, set forth on their journey via Syria and Cilicia. In doing so, they entered Galatia by the eastern front rather than by the southern front as Paul had previously. Again, they visit the churches and brethren as anticipated, achieving Paul's missionary and pastoral goal of strengthening the disciples.

What can we glean from this account? Two church leaders parted ways and the result was a multiplication of laborers in the missionary work force. The Great Commission advanced at the cost of heartache.

It is interesting that Luke records *that* a conflict occurred and the *issue* over which it occurred. He records the *severity* of the conflict. He records the *results* of the conflict: separation and multiplication. What Luke does *not* do is to dwell on the issue. He does not record who was right and who was wrong. He does not dwell on how long the unease between the two existed. Rather, he records the progress of the Great Commission. Barnabas and Mark went one way with the gospel while Paul and Silas went another way with the gospel. Both teams were going with the gospel. This, to Luke, was the issue. We can deduce some things from this.

[10] William Barclay, The Acts of the Apostles: The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955), 128

1. **First**, contention among men of God is a fact of life. Deal with it and get over it. Don't expect perfection. Sometimes conflict can (for the time being) be irreconcilable and believers may go their separate ways. Dissension with its resultant division is a fact of local church life.

2. **Second**, the Great Commission is more important than complete agreement amongst the brothers. The reason that the Great Commission is the most important thing is because this is the means of glorifying of God. The gospel is the message and the mandate, but it is also the means by which we fulfill this. Again, we don't read of either Paul or Barnabas licking their wounds but rather going forth for the gospel's sake. And most likely this was because they applied the gospel to their lives daily and the disharmony paled in significance. You see, though they differed on personnel, they shared the hope of glory.

3. **Third**, Romans 8:28 applies when brothers are in conflict as well as to all other areas. Even in the midst of division, God works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

4. **Fourth**, setbacks in the local church's efforts to carry out the Great Commission will happen. Don't be surprised and don't be distracted. We must keep on keeping on.

5. **Fifth**, even the best of men are still men at best. Therefore, be careful of being devastated each time you hear of broken relationships between those you respect.

6. **Sixth**, avoid the temptation to take sides when there are legitimate disagreements. Though we may indeed form our own conclusion about whom is right and wrong, at the same time let us guard against demonizing the party we don't agree with. In fact, it would seem that Paul was sensitive to this. Some time after this event, he wrote to the Corinthians of the fact that those who ministered the gospel to a church ought to be financially supported by that church. In dealing with this subject, he wrote, "Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working?" (1 Corinthians 9:6). To Paul—even after this disagreement—Barnabas was a minister of the Word who warranted financial support from those to whom he ministered.

7. **Seventh**, disagreements need to be kept at the level of principle (when possible) thus keeping open the door for future relationship. Don't burn your bridges. Keep the door open for a second chance. Again, this is a lesson that Paul learned. Even those who side with Paul on this argument must acknowledge that, later in life, he recognized Mark as a beneficial servant of the gospel. Mark was ministering

alongside him when he wrote to Philemon (Philemon 24) and to the Colossians (Colossians 4:10), and when he was in prison near the end of his life, he urged Timothy to find Mark and bring him because Mark was "useful to me for ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). And in 1 Peter 5:12-13 we find Silas ("Silvanus") and Mark laboring alongside one another with Peter. Mark's failure was not final, and that was recognized by Paul and Silas.

God Moves His People

But there is another issue to which this text speaks; namely, that God sovereignly moves and uses His people. God was not dependent upon this dynamic duo. He used them, but apparently He intended to do so only for a *season*. It was a great season, and a fruitful and glorious one, but it was a *season* nonetheless.

Our church has experienced this dynamic in the past, when men who have labored on the pastoral staff with me have been called elsewhere. BRANDON JACOBSON

What are some of the lessons that we have learned as a church in the past and in this present situation? What can we make of it?

First, we have come to see that we need to recognize God's hand in such moves. It is God who uses ministry teams and He has every right to divide those teams when it suits His kind purposes.

Second, God separates ministry teams for the cause of the Great Commission. Ministry teams are sometimes "separated unto the gospel." When this happens, other churches are strengthened by the one who has been called there. Similarly, the "sending" church is strengthened as others are called upon to stand in the gap. It creates opportunities for the development of new leaders and helps to further equip the existing leadership. And when two local churches are strengthened by means of such gospel division, other local churches can also be impacted.

Third, not every separation is not due to sharp contention. Brandon was called elsewhere due to shared conviction that it is the will of God for the glory of God and for the kingdom of God. As a church, therefore, we cannot grumble over what God is doing. It is His prerogative to move His people. It is His sovereign right to shift His servants. We ought not to make it harder on the separated party than it already is.

Conclusion

While this separation was no doubt painful, there is a very real sense in which we ought to be thankful for it, because it was through this separation that the gospel went to the regions beyond and ultimately reached us today.

Thank God that He sovereignly works even in painful situations in order to separate people unto the gospel for His glory.