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Striving With One Another

Acts 15:36-41

July 31, 2005

Acts 15:36-41 - 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." ³⁷ Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. 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. ³⁹ Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. [NKJV]

❖ Introduction

Having considered the chief of the graces, the obligation we have to love one another and then the command that we be like-minded with one another, we move on today to consider how it is that we resolve differences among us. Naturally, in God's ordinary providence, we submit ourselves to the Scriptures and work together until we have unity of mind on what they teach. But there is an example in the Scriptures where the early church leaders were not able to come to the same mind on an issue. Specifically, we will consider this well-known example of contention that arose between leaders in the early church regarding John Mark and how they resolved their differences.

Some have tried to argue that the NT church was the "golden age" of the church. When some make the call for returning to the NT church, we must remember that this was the church in its infancy or at best toddler years. God has granted much clarity on numerous issues to the church but most importantly, His grace is covering the entire globe. Everything was not rosy for the early church and even the leaders had differences. But don't miss how few examples of this kind of division we have in the Scriptures—it would be impossible to say that this solution to this particular dispute should become normative. The Scriptures actually tell us nothing about the subject of the dispute but there is a tremendous amount of information given surrounding the events that give us at least one plausible explanation.

❖ Background

The Inclusion of the Gentiles Into the Covenant Was a Monumental Struggle

- .. The first time that Paul visits Jerusalem (after his conversion) is where the disciples feared him but Barnabas championed Paul's character and the mighty works God had done through him following his conversion (Acts 9:26).
- .. The issue of Gentile conversions is confronted head-on at the conversion of Cornelius, a pagan centurion. Cornelius is also referred to as a God-Fearer. God Fearers were gentiles who believed in the God of Israel and participated in the synagogues (typically in the back) but had not been circumcised or acknowledged as entering into the covenant. (See also Acts 13:16, 26). Even despite this level of faith shown by a gentile, Peter was attacked by some from the Circumcision for entering Cornelius' home despite the conversion (Acts 11:1-3). However, Peter was able to explain all the details of what had happened and this group ultimately glorified God. Still, this could not be recognized as a wide-spread persuasion of the Circumcision group.
- .. Paul visits Jerusalem for a second time (a number of years later) for the purpose of delivering famine relief to those who are suffering in the region. Agabus the prophet (Acts 11:27-30) had shown by the Spirit that there was coming a great famine. The disciples gathered alms for the relief effort and gave it to Paul and Barnabas who delivered it to the church there. Paul and Barnabas later return to Antioch and take John Mark with them (Acts 12:25).

- “ In Acts 13, John Mark (the author of the second Gospel) accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey. When they reached the city of Paphos, there was a confrontation with a sorcerer and also a conversion of a pagan, Roman, political leader—Sergius Paulus. It is after this, at the next port in Perga of Pamphylia, that the Scriptures record that John Mark returns back to Jerusalem. We are not told in the Scriptures what the issue was that sent Mark back home but one possible explanation is that Mark struggled with the conversion of a pagan. It would be this caliber of significant issue that could explain the sharp contention later on about including Mark on the second journey to the gentiles to re-visit those same churches established during the first journey. These events occurred before the council at Jerusalem convened to resolve the matter. Paul and Barnabas finished this first missionary journey and continued on through numerous cities establishing the church in the cities in the region of Galatia.
- “ The third time that Paul comes to Jerusalem after his conversion is to convene the apostles and elders from around the region to answer the teaching of the Judaizers which stated that “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” (Acts 15:1) There was much dispute and the group heard testimony from Paul, Barnabas and from Peter regarding the ways that God had been working in the gentile communities. Finally James stands up and officially declares that the testimony of the three men is consistent with the Scriptures and the council declares that the Gentiles are not obligated to keep the ceremonial law. They give four other exhortations to the gentiles to abstain from sexual immorality and other things that might be a stumbling block to their Jewish Christian brothers. The matter is widely accepted amongst the church with the exception of the Judaizers. Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch where the letter stating the conclusion of the matter is read and is also widely received.
- “ Some days later Paul is anxious to return to the churches that they had established on the first journey to read the letter to them, to encourage them and to generally see how they were doing. Barnabas is insistent on including John Mark on this second journey and Paul equally is adamant about not taking him. This becomes a sharp contention.

❖ So, Who Was Right?

- “ We don’t know because the Scriptures do not reveal if Paul was out of line or if Barnabas was or if they both were.
- “ If we are correct in our assumption regarding the context of John Mark’s return from the first journey that is, his refusal to see the gentiles brought into the covenant without first becoming a Jew, and if we are also correct that after the Jerusalem Council when the verdict was brought back by Paul to Antioch that John Mark warmly accepted the conclusion, then it possibly could be said that Barnabas was at least correct about the *character* of Mark. There are some other indications about Mark’s character:
 - 1) God seemed pleased enough with Mark to have him write the second Gospel.
 - 2) As the “Son of Encouragement” Barnabas had some history in accurately assessing the character of a man in light of a drastic change in that man’s theology or demeanor—the Apostle Paul. Only Barnabas championed Paul’s conversion to the other disciples (Acts 9:27).
 - 3) Later, Paul himself seems to testify to John Mark’s usefulness to him.

Galatians 2

- “ So if Barnabas was right about the character of Mark, it could also be said that ultimately Paul was right, *about the issue* of gentile conversions. This was a topic that dogged Paul all the years of his ministry and Paul vehemently fought for salvation by grace through faith for the gentiles. There are some other indications in the Scriptures about Paul’s assessment of the issue:
 - 1) Barnabas himself had fallen into this very sin in Antioch when Paul confronted Peter for withdrawing table fellowship when some from James came in the room (Galatians 2:13).
 - 2) In his other epistles, Paul talks about ensuring that nothing could come as a stumbling block in his deliverance of the gospel to gentiles. Perhaps Paul is concerned that Mark’s former position might make it difficult for some.
 - 3) Also possible is that Paul anticipated much contention (just like what had precipitated the council

of Jerusalem) and needed to know for sure that those with him would stand with him when the battle got fierce.

❖ **Endeavoring to Keep the Unity of the Spirit While Pursuing Unity of Mind**

Ephesians 4:1-4; 11-16

- “ It would be a stretch to think that this one example of dividing as the solution to a contentious situation establishes some kind of pattern. Similarly, regarding the conversion of the thief on the cross, a wise Puritan wrote, “We have one account of a deathbed repentance in order that no man need despair; we have *only* one, in order that no man may presume.”
- “ We must check our hearts and motivations if this one example is where we turn to resolve our differences. It appears that the compromise that Paul and Barnabas came to was accepted by the brethren as they sent them on their separate journeys and commended them to the grace of God, and as a result the churches were strengthened (Acts 15).
- “ Notice also that the compromise was arrived at *after* the sharp striving. They did not begin with this solution but sought to be of like mind. Although it may be true that a situation could arise in our midst where someone needs to part ways, it should only occur after a tremendous amount of loving one another, prayer together, turning to the Word of God and deferring to one another.
- “ God knows that His church does not have unity on many issues. This is why He gave teachers and apostles and prophets and pastors so that we can become equipped until we all come to the unity of the faith. This is the process of sanctification that God works in us all of our lives.

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