

TUTORIAL

2.20

An important meeting and Paul revisits the new churches

Paul and Barnabas attend a meeting in Jerusalem that considers important issues relating to the new Gentile believers. They then decide to visit the churches they'd planted on their previous trip, but they disagree over the addition of John Mark and finally go their separate ways, and Paul travels with Silas, a leader in the Jerusalem church. In southern Galatia, Paul invites a young disciple, Timothy, to join them as they go from town to town in that area strengthening the churches.

The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Acts 15:1-16:5**.

Last time

When the Jews in Pisidian Antioch rejected the Gospel, Paul and Barnabas indicated that from now on they would target the Gentiles with their Message. After being evicted from that city they moved on to Iconium where they saw a church planted. Despite a campaign of slander against them, they stayed there for some time teaching God's Word. When they heard of a plot to kill them, they travelled to Lystra where they had difficulty convincing the people not to worship them as gods. After going to one more place, Derbe, they revisited the churches where they'd been, encouraging the believers and appointing elders. Eventually they arrived home in Antioch and shared about what God had done through them.

Paul and Barnabas attend an important meeting

The next part of Luke's Acts account (Acts 15:1-32) focuses on a controversy that has been simmering in the Church almost from the beginning. At its most fundamental level, the dispute is about how a person can be declared righteous by God. As we've seen, among those who identify with the Church there are some who acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, but who also insist that the Law given to Moses must be followed, New Covenant or not. Some of them come down to Antioch of Syria and begin teaching dogmatically that a man who is not circumcised cannot be saved...faith in Jesus Christ is not enough. Understandably, after what they've just experienced on their recent church planting trip among the Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas disagree strongly with them.

The Antioch church decides that it needs help to resolve this issue. Paul and Barnabas along with others are sent to Jerusalem to discuss it with the Apostles and elders. There's no sense in the Acts Narrative of a denominational hierarchy being created, but we do see a healthy interdependence. And in this case we see a local church reaching out to seek counsel from other godly leaders, and humbly submitting to the authority of the Lord's Apostles.

After extensive discussions in Jerusalem, Peter declares his position, which is that clearly God has accepted Gentiles based solely on their faith, and has confirmed this by giving them the Holy Spirit. Why then, he asks, should they be burdened with Jewish laws and traditions, which no one can ever perfectly fulfill anyway? He sums up with this profound statement, "We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus." Then Paul and Barnabas are given opportunity to share the amazing and indisputable evidence of God's blessing that they experienced during their recent trip into the predominantly Gentile communities.

Finally, James, one of the other key leaders in the Jerusalem church, takes the floor. He quotes the prophet Amos to show that Gentile people coming to faith apart from the Law is something God always intended. Then he summarizes the decisions of this meeting that has become known as *the Jerusalem Council*... Guided by God's Spirit they feel there should be no obligation on Gentile believers to follow the Jewish Law...but they should keep clear of the idolatry and immorality of their former cultish associations, and also avoid eating meat with blood - something that would be very offensive to their Jewish brothers and sisters. A letter spelling out these conclusions is given to Paul, Barnabas and two leaders chosen by the Jerusalem church, Judas and Silas. When they get back and read it out in the Antioch church it comes as a real encouragement to the believers, many of whom as we know, are Gentiles.

Paul and Barnabas head off on separate teams

Some time passes during which Paul and Barnabas continue to work in Antioch, sharing God's Word (Acts 15:36-41). When Paul suggests a return visit to the churches they'd planted on their previous trip, Barnabas is enthusiastic. This highlights again the concern the two church planters obviously have for those who've come to faith through their testimony. Later Paul will use many metaphors to describe this sense of responsibility he feels for the churches he has planted, perhaps the most striking being that of a mother with a newborn baby.

Even though they fully concur on the need for a follow-up visit to the churches, they have very different opinions on the issue of team members. Paul strongly disagrees with Barnabas' idea of inviting John Mark again... No way, he deserted before in Pamphylia. How can you trust someone like that again?

Feelings are so strong they decide to go their separate ways. The Spirit doesn't lead Luke to comment on the rights and wrongs of this situation, so we have to be careful in imposing our own conclusions. Perhaps we are to understand that the Holy Spirit was guiding both in their respective viewpoints, and that having two teams head out at this point is what He intends.

So Barnabas takes his cousin, John Mark, and leaves for his home island of Cyprus, while Paul invites Silas to travel with him as he heads north then west through the regions of Syria and Cilicia. Silas - also known by his Latin name Silvanus - is a good choice for Paul's church strengthening and planting team. He is a well-regarded leader from the Jerusalem fellowship and gifted by the Spirit as a prophet. The church at Antioch knows him from his recent visit, and they are able to confidently send him out with Paul on this new initiative. Also, as the Narrative will soon note, like Paul, he enjoys the legal protection of being a Roman citizen.

A young man, Timothy, joins Paul's team

The first place they visit, on what has become known as *Paul's Second Missionary Journey*, is Derbe...then on to Lystra, the place where Paul nearly died last time after an angry crowd tried to kill him with stones. Here (Acts 16:1-5) we meet for the first time a young man of mixed Greek and Jewish descent who will play a significant role in the Acts Narrative and the early expansion of the Church: Timothy. We don't know if Timothy first accepts the Gospel through Paul's teaching or through the testimony of his mother and grandmother, also committed followers of Jesus. Luke notes that he is "well thought of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium": in other words, the churches in that part of Galatia. It's worth remembering that only a few short years before, none of these fellowships existed. Now, because Paul and Barnabas were willing to take the Good News to those communities, there are groups - local *ecclesia* - of God's children there who are able to share God's life-giving Narrative with others.

Luke calls Timothy a *disciple* - just one of the ways the Narrative refers to those who've believed in Jesus for salvation. The Greek word he uses is *mathétés*, referring to someone who follows the instructions of an individual and/or a body of teaching. Later this would be translated into Latin as *discipulus*, and then into English as *disciple*. Earlier, in the account of their initial visit to this area, the text says that Paul and Barnabas were "preaching the Good News...and making disciples" (Acts 14:21). This, of course, is exactly what Jesus had authorized His Apostles - and through them His entire *Ecclesia* - to do. It also connects with an important Narrative thread we've been following...how from the beginning God has been delegating real responsibility to His image-bearers who humbly walk with Him. It's something that flows from God's character and forms an important part of His overall purposes. Now Paul, who's been helped himself by others on this road of following Jesus, commits to doing the same with Timothy. He invites the young disciple to join their team

and in time, as we'll see, Paul will entrust Timothy with major discipleship responsibilities himself.

There's an instructive side note to Timothy's inclusion. Having grown up in his father's house that's dominated by Greek rather than Jewish cultural norms, Timothy has not been circumcised. It's interesting that Paul, who is so quick to resist any mingling of Jewish rules and traditions with the Good News, arranges for Timothy to be circumcised before he joins the team. Clearly this has nothing to do with his standing in God's eyes...instead, Paul's intention is that as God's workmen they should avoid anything that will get in the way of people hearing truth. He very firmly believes that representatives of the Lord Jesus should become whatever they need to be, so that if people walk away it's because they're rejecting the Good News, not because they've been personally or culturally offended.

The team, led by Paul and Silas, moves on from Lystra, visiting the local *ecclesia* - gatherings of disciples - in the different towns. Their visits strengthen the believers in their faith and more people are saved and added to the churches. As we've already noted, and as we'll continue to see in the Acts account and beyond, Paul assumes a very real sense of responsibility for the individuals and groups of God's children who've come to faith through his sharing of the Good News. He is aware that there is a long way to go for them to 'grow up', as it were, in the faith...and for that to happen they will need to be taught God's Word and disciplined in a way that helps them move from spiritual infancy to maturity.



DISCUSSION POINTS

An important meeting in Jerusalem and Paul revisits the new churches

1. Describe some of the dynamics that you think made this issue of the Jewish Law, and particularly circumcision, such a tenacious problem for the early Church. Given that our historic and cultural situation is obviously very different, do you feel there are any related areas of confusion that churches in our society could struggle with?
2. Despite taking opposite stances, do you think it is possible that both Paul and Barnabas were correct in their respective

decisions about whether or not to invite John Mark along again? Please explain your answer.

3. What has been your experience in regard to discipleship? Has anyone more experienced in the faith played a significant role of helping you along consistently? Have you ever played that role with anyone else? How would you describe: (1) the goal(s) of this kind of relationship, (2) the key elements that make it effective?
4. While circumcision is unlikely to be an issue now, give some examples of the personal and cultural adjustments that you feel you could make to be a more effective witness for the Lord in your current context with people you already know. Then briefly do the same for (1) another sub-culture in this country, (2) a different country and culture you know something about. Note: Try to picture the whole range of things that you might need to change or be willing to give up - tangible and otherwise.