

# CHAPTER 15

Hitherto we have, with a great deal of pleasure, attended the apostles in their glorious travels for the propagating of the gospel in foreign parts, have seen the bounds of the church enlarged by the accession both of Jews and Gentiles to it; and thanks be to that God who always caused them to triumph. We left them, in the close of the foregoing chapter, reposing themselves at Antioch, and edifying the church there with the rehearsal of their experiences, and it is a pity they should ever be otherwise employed; but in this chapter we find other work (not so pleasant) cut out for them. The Christians and ministers are engaged in controversy, and those that should have been now busied in enlarging the dominions of the church have as much as they can do to compose the divisions of it; when they should have been making war upon the devil's kingdom they have much ado to keep the peace in Christ's kingdom. Yet this occurrence and the record of it are of great use to the church, both for warning to us to expect such unhappy discords among Christians, and direction to us what method to take for accommodating them. Here is,

- I.** A controversy raised at Antioch by the judaizing teachers, who would have the believing Gentiles brought under the yoke of circumcision and the ceremonial law (v. 1, 2).
- II.** A consultation held with the church at Jerusalem about this matter, and the sending of delegates thither for that purpose, which occasioned the starting of the same question there (v. 35).
- III.** An account of what passed in the synod that was convened upon this occasion (v. 6). What Peter said (v. 7-11). What Paul and Barnabas discoursed of (v. 12). And, lastly, what James proposed for the settling of this matter (v. 13-21).
- IV.** The result of this debate, and the circular letter that was written to the Gentile converts, directing them how to govern themselves with respect to Jews (v. 22-29).
- V.** The delivering of this determination to the church at Antioch, and the satisfaction it gave them (v. 30-35).

**VI.** A second expedition designed by Paul and Barnabas to preach to the Gentiles, in which they quarrelled about their assistant, and separated upon it, one steering one course and the other another (v. 36-41).

## ~~4155~~ ACTS 15:15

### CONTROVERSY RAISED AT ANTIOCH

Even when things go on very smoothly and pleasantly in a state or in a church, it is folly to be secure, and to think the mountain stands strong and cannot be moved; some uneasiness or other will arise, which is not foreseen, cannot be prevented, but must be prepared for. If ever there was a heaven upon earth, surely it was in the church at Antioch at this time, when there were so many excellent ministers there, and blessed Paul among them, building up that church in her most holy faith. But here we have their peace disturbed, and differences arising. Here is,

**I.** A new doctrine started among them, which occasioned this division, obliging the Gentile converts to submit to circumcision and the ceremonial law, v. 1. Many that had been proselytes to the Jewish religion became Christians; and they would have such as were proselyted to the Christian religion to become Jews.

**1.** The persons that urged this were *certain men who came down from Judea*; some think such as had been of the Pharisees (v. 5), or perhaps of those priests who were *obedient to the faith*, ~~4167~~ Acts 6:7. They came from Judea, pretending perhaps to be sent by the apostles at Jerusalem, at least to be countenanced by them. Having a design to spread their notions, they came to Antioch, because that was the head-quarters of those that preached to the Gentiles, and the rendezvous of the Gentile converts; and, if they could but make an interest there, this leaven would soon be diffused to all the churches of the Gentiles. They insinuated themselves into an acquaintance with the brethren, pretended to be very glad that they had embraced the Christian faith, and congratulated them on their conversion; but tell them that *yet one thing they lack*, they must be circumcised. Note, Those that are ever so well taught have need to stand upon their guard that they be not untaught again, or ill taught.

2. The position they laid down, the thesis they gave, was this, that except the Gentiles who turned Christians were *circumcised after the manner of Moses*, and thereby bound themselves to all the observances of the ceremonial law, *they could not be saved*. As to this,

(1.) Many of the Jews who embraced the faith of Christ, yet continued very *zealous for the law*, ~~Act~~ Acts 21:20. They knew it was from God and its authority was sacred, valued it for its antiquity, had been bred up in the observance of it, and it is probable had been often devoutly affected in their attendance on these observances; they therefore kept them up after they were by baptism admitted into the Christian church, kept up the distinction of meats, and used the ceremonial purifyings from ceremonial pollutions, attend the temple service, and celebrated the feasts of the Jews. Herein they were connived at, because the prejudices of education are not to be overcome all at once, and in a few years the mistake would be effectually rectified by the destruction of the temple and the total dissolution of the Jewish church, by which the observance of the Mosaic ritual would become utterly impracticable. But it did not suffice them that they were herein indulged themselves, they must have the Gentile converts brought under the same obligations. Note, There is a strange proneness in us to make our opinion and practice a rule and a law to every body else, to judge of all about us by our standard, and to conclude that because we do well all do wrong that do not just as we do.

(2.) Those Jews who believed that Christ was the Messiah, as they could not get clear of their affection to the law, so they could not get clear of the notions they had of the Messiah, that he should set up a temporal kingdom in favour of the Jewish nation, should make this illustrious and victorious; it was a disappointment to them that there was as yet nothing done towards this in the way they expected. But now that they hear the doctrine of Christ is received among the Gentiles, and his kingdom begins to be set up in the midst of them, if they can but persuade those that embrace Christ to embrace the law of Moses too they hope their point will be gained, the Jewish nation will be made as considerable as they can wish, though in another way; and “Therefore by all means let the brethren be pressed to be *circumcised and keep the law*, and then with our religion our dominion will be extended, and we shall in a little time be able to shake off the Roman yoke; and not only so, but to put it on the necks of our neighbours, and so shall have such a kingdom of the Messiah as we promised ourselves.” Note, It is no wonder if those who have wrong notions of the

kingdom of Christ take wrong measures for the advancement of it, and such as really tend to the destruction of it, as these do.

**(3.)** The controversy about the circumcising of the Gentile proselytes had been on foot among the Jews long before this. This is observed by Dr. Whitby out of Josephus *Antiq.* 20.38-45: “That when Izates, the son of Helen queen of Adiabene, embraced the Jews' 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 (as he relates in the history of his own life) “the zealots among the Jews were urgent for their circumcision; but Josephus dissuaded them from insisting upon it.” Such has been the difference in all ages between bigotry and moderation.

**(4.)** It is observable what a mighty stress they laid upon it; they do not only say, “*You ought to be circumcised after the manner of Moses*, and it will be good service to the kingdom of the Messiah if you be; it will best accommodate matters between you and the Jewish converts, and we shall take it very kindly if you will, and shall converse the more familiarly with you;” but, “*Except you be circumcised you cannot be saved*. If you be not herein of our mind and way, you will never go to heaven, and therefore of course you must go to hell.” Note, it is common for proud impostors to enforce their own inventions under pain of damnation; and to tell people that unless they believe just as they would have them believe, and do just as they would have them do, they cannot be saved, it is impossible they should; not only their case is hazardous, but it is desperate. Thus the Jews tell their brethren that except they be of their church, and come into their communion, and conform to the ceremonies of their worship, though otherwise good men and believers in Christ, yet they cannot be saved; salvation itself cannot save them. None are in Christ but those that are within their pale. We ought to see ourselves well warranted by the word of God before we say, “*Except you do so and so, you cannot be saved.*”

**II.** The opposition which Paul and Barnabas gave to this schismatical notion, which engrossed salvation to the Jews, now that Christ has opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles (v. 2): *They had no small dissension and disputation with them*. They would by no means yield to this doctrine, but appeared and argued publicly against it.

**1.** As faithful servants of Christ, they would not see his truths betrayed. They knew that Christ came to free us from the yoke of the ceremonial law, and to take down that wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles and unite them both in himself; and therefore could not bear to hear of circumcising the Gentile converts, when their instructions were only to baptize them. The Jews would unite with the Gentiles, that is, they would have them to conform in every thing to their rites, and then, and not till then they will look upon them as their brethren; and no thanks to them. But, this not being the way in which Christ designed to unite them, it is not to be admitted.

**2.** As spiritual fathers to the Gentile converts, they would not see their liberties encroached upon. They had told the Gentiles that if they believed in Jesus Christ they should be saved; and now to be told that this was not enough to save them, except they were circumcised and kept the law of Moses, this was such a discouragement to them at setting out, and would be such a stumbling-block in their way, as might almost tempt them to think of returning into Egypt again; and therefore the apostles set themselves against it.

**III.** The expedient pitched upon for preventing the mischief of this dangerous notion, and silencing those that vented it, as well as quieting the minds of the people with reference to it. They determined that Paul and Barnabas, and some others of their number, should *go to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders*, concerning this doubt. Not that the church at Antioch had any doubt concerning it: they knew the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free; but they sent the case to Jerusalem,

**1.** Because those who taught this doctrine came from Jerusalem, and pretended to have directions from the apostles there to urge circumcision upon the Gentile converts; it was therefore very proper to send to Jerusalem about it, to know if they had any such direction from the church there. And it was soon found to be all wrong, which yet pretended to be of apostolical right. It was true that these *went out from them* (v. 24), but they never had any such orders from them.

**2.** Because those who were taught this doctrine would be the better confirmed in their opposition to it, and in the less danger of being shocked and disturbed by it, if they were sure that *the apostles and elders at Jerusalem* (which was the Christian church that of all others retained the

most affection to the law of Moses) were against it; and, if they could but have this under their hands, it would be the likeliest means to silence and shame these incendiaries, who had pretended to have it from them.

**3.** Because the apostles at Jerusalem were fittest to be consulted in a point not yet fully settled; and being most eminent for an infallible spirit, peculiar to them as apostles, their decision would be likely to end the controversy. It was owing to the subtlety and malice of the great enemy of the church's peace (as it appears by Paul's frequent complaints of these *judaiizing teachers*, these *false apostles*, these *deceitful workers*, these *enemies of the cross of Christ*), that it had not this effect.

**IV.** Their journey to Jerusalem upon this errand, v. 3. Where we find,

**1.** That they were honoured at parting: *They were brought on their way by the church*, which was then much used as a token of respect to useful men, and is directed to be done *after a godly sort*, ~~606~~3 John 1:6. Thus the church showed their favour to those who witnessed against these encroachments on the liberties of the Gentile converts, and stood up for them.

**2.** That they did good as they went along. They were men that would not lose time, and therefore visited the churches by the way; they passed through Phenice and Samaria, and as they went *declared the conversion of the Gentiles*, and what wonderful success the gospel had had among them, which *caused great joy to all the brethren*. Note, The progress of the gospel is and ought to be a matter of great joy. *All the brethren*, the faithful brethren in Christ's family, rejoice when more are born into the family; for the family will be never the poorer for the multitude of its children. In Christ and heaven there is portion enough, and inheritance enough for them all.

**V.** Their hearty welcome at Jerusalem, v. 4.

**1.** The good entertainment their friends gave them: They were *received of the church, and of the apostles and elders*, were embraced as brethren, and had audience as messengers of the church at Antioch; they received them with all possible expressions of love and friendship.

**2.** The good entertainment they gave their friends: They *declared all things that God had done with them*, gave them an account of the success of their ministry among the Gentiles, not what they had done, but *what*

*God had done with them*, what he had by his grace in them enabled them to do, and what he had by his grace in their hearers enabled them to receive. As they went they had planted, as they came back they had watered; but in both they were ready to own it was God that gave the increase. Note, It is a great honour to be employed for God, to be workers for him; for those that are so have him a worker with them, and he must have all the glory.

**VI.** The opposition they met with from the same party at Jerusalem, v. 5. When Barnabas and Paul gave an account of the multitude of the Gentiles, and of the great harvest of souls gathered in to Christ there, and all about them congratulated them upon it, *there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees*, who received the tidings very coldly, and, though they believed in Christ, yet were not satisfied in the admission of these converts, but thought it was needful to circumcise them. Observe here,

**1.** That those who have been most prejudiced against the gospel yet have been captivated by it; so mighty has it been through God to the pulling down of strong-holds. When Christ was here upon earth, few or none of the rulers and of the Pharisees believed on him; but now there are those of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, and many of them, we hope, in sincerity.

**2.** That it is very hard for men suddenly to get clear of their prejudices: those that had been Pharisees, even after they became Christians, retained some of the old leaven. All did not so, witness Paul, but some did; and they had such a jealousy for the ceremonial law, and such a dislike of the Gentiles, that they could not admit the Gentiles into communion with them, unless they would be circumcised, and thereby engage themselves to keep the law of Moses. This was, in their opinion, needful; and for their parts they would not converse with them unless they submitted to it.

## ⌘ ACTS 15:621

### THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

We have here a council called, not by writ, but by consent, on this occasion (v. 6): *The apostles and presbyters came together, to consider this matter*. They did not give their judgment separately, but came together

to do it, that they might hear one another's sense in this matter; for in the multitude of counsellors there is safety and satisfaction. They did not give their judgment rashly, but considered of this matter. Though they were clear concerning it in their own minds, yet they would take time to consider of it, and to hear what might be said by the adverse party. Nor did the apostles give their judgment concerning it without the elders, the inferior ministers, to whom they thus condescended, and on whom they thus put an honour. Those that are most eminent in gifts and graces, and are in the most exalted stations in the church, ought to show respect to their juniors and inferiors; for, though *days should speak*, yet *there is a spirit in man*, ~~881E~~ Job 32:7, 8. Here is a direction to the pastors of the churches, when difficulties arise, to come together in solemn meetings for mutual advice and encouragement, that they may know one another's mind, and strengthen one another's hands, and may act in concert. Now here we have,

**I.** Peter's speech in this synod. He did not in the least pretend to any primacy or headship in this synod. He was not master of this assembly, nor so much as chairman or moderator, *pro hac vice on this occasion*; for we do not find that either he spoke first, to open the synod (*there having been much disputing before he rose up*), nor that he spoke last, to sum up the cause and collect the suffrages; but he was a faithful, prudent zealous member of this assembly, and offered that which was very much to the purpose, and which would come better from him than from another, because he had himself been the first that preached the gospel to the Gentiles. *There had been much disputing, pro and con*, upon this question, and liberty of speech allowed, as ought to be in such cases; those of the sect of the Pharisees were some of them present, and allowed to say what they could in defence of those of their opinion at Antioch, which probably was answered by some of the elders; such questions ought to be fairly disputed before they are decided. When both sides had been heard, *Peter rose up*, and addressed himself to the assembly, *Men and brethren*, as did James afterwards, v. 13. And here,

**1.** He put them in mind of the call and commission he had some time ago *to preach the gospel to the Gentiles*; he wondered there should be any difficulty made of a matter already settled: *You know that aph' hemeron archaion from the beginning of the days of the gospel, many years ago, God made choice among us apostles of one to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, and I was the person chosen, that the Gentiles by my mouth*



*should hear the word, and believe*, v. 7. You know I was questioned about it and cleared myself to the universal satisfaction; every body rejoiced that *God had granted to the Gentiles repentance unto life*, and nobody said a word of circumcising them, nor was there any thought of such a thing. See <sup><4115></sup>Acts 11:18. “Why should the Gentiles who hear the word of the gospel by Paul's mouth be compelled to submit to circumcision, any more than those that heard it by my mouth? Or why should the terms of their admission now be made harder than they were then?”

**2.** He puts them in mind how remarkably God owned him in preaching to the Gentiles, and gave testimony to their sincerity in embracing the Christian faith (v. 8): “*God, who knows the hearts*, and therefore is able to judge infallibly of men, *bore them witness* that they were his indeed, by *giving them the Holy Ghost*; not only the graces and comforts, but the extraordinary miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost, *even as he did unto us apostles*.” See <sup><4115></sup>Acts 11:15-17. Note, *The Lord knows those that are his*, for he knows men's hearts; and we are as our hearts are. Those to whom God *gives the Holy Ghost*, he thereby *bears witness* to that they are his; hence we are said to be *sealed* with that Holy Spirit of promise *marked for God*. God had bidden the Gentiles welcome to the privilege of communion with him, without requiring them to be circumcised and to keep the law; and there-fore shall not we admit them into communion with us but upon those terms? “God has *put no difference between us and them* (v. 9); they, though Gentiles, are as welcome to the grace of Christ and the throne of grace as we Jews are; why then should we set them at a distance, as if we were holier than they?” <sup><385></sup>Isaiah 65:5. Note, We ought not to make any conditions of our brethren's acceptance with us but such as God has made the conditions of their acceptance with him, <sup><454></sup>Romans 14:3. Now the Gentiles were fitted for communion with God, in *having their hearts purified by faith*, and that faith God's own work in them; and therefore why should we think them unfit for communion with us, unless they will submit to the ceremonial purifying enjoined by the law to us? Note,

**(1.)** *By faith the heart is purified*; we are not only justified, and conscience purified, but the work of sanctification is begun and carried on.

**(2.)** Those that have their hearts purified by faith are therein made so nearly to resemble one another, that, whatever difference there may be between them, no account is to be made of it; for the faith of all the saints is alike precious, and has like precious effects (<sup><411></sup>2 Peter 1:1), and those

that by it are united to Christ are so to look upon themselves as joined to one another as that all distinctions, even that between Jew and Gentile, are merged and swallowed up in it.

**3.** He sharply reproveth those teachers (some of whom, it is likely, were present) who went about to bring the Gentiles under the obligation of the law of Moses, v. 10. The thing is so plain that he cannot forbear speaking of it with some warmth: “*Now therefore, since God has owned them for his, why tempt you God to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, of the believing Gentiles and their children*” (for circumcision was a yoke upon their infant seed, who are here reckoned among the disciples), “*a yoke which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?*” Here he shows that in this attempt,

**(1.)** They offered a very great affront to God: “You tempt him, by calling that in question which he has already settled and determined by no less an indication than that of the gift of the Holy Ghost; you do, in effect, ask, ‘Did he know what he did? Or was he in earnest in it? Or will he abide by his own act?’ Will you try whether God, who designed the ceremonial law for the people of the Jews only, will now, in its last ages, bring the Gentiles too under the obligation of it, to gratify you?” Those tempt God who prescribe to him, and say that people cannot be saved but upon such and such terms, which God never appointed; as if the God of salvation must come into their measures.

**(2.)** They offered a very great wrong to the disciples: Christ came to proclaim *liberty to the captives*, and they go about to enslave those whom he has made free. See ~~4188~~ Nehemiah 5:8. The ceremonial law was a heavy yoke; they and their fathers found it difficult to be borne, so numerous, so various, so pompous, were the institutions of it. The distinction of meats was a heavy yoke, not only as it rendered conversation less pleasant, but as it embarrassed conscience with endless scruples. The ado that was made about even unavoidable touch of a grave or a dead body, the pollution contracted by it, and the many rules about purifying from that pollution, were a heavy burden. This yoke Christ came to ease us of, and called those that were *weary and heavy laden* under it to come and take his yoke upon them, his easy yoke. Now for these teachers to go about to lay that yoke upon the neck of the Gentiles from which he came to free even the Jews was the greatest injury imaginable to them.

**4.** Whereas the Jewish teachers had urged that circumcision was necessary to salvation, Peter shows it was so far from being so that both Jews and Gentiles were to be saved purely *through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*, and in no other way (v. 11): *We believe to be saved through that grace only; pisteuomen sothenai We hope to be saved; or, We believe unto salvation in the same manner as they kath' hon tropon kakeinoi.* “We that are circumcised believe to salvation, and so do those that are uncircumcised; and, as our circumcision will be no advantage to us, so their uncircumcision will be no disadvantage to them; for we must depend upon the grace of Christ for salvation, and must apply that grace by faith, as well as they. There is not one way of salvation for the Jews and another for the Gentiles; *neither circumcision avails any thing nor uncircumcision* (that is neither here nor there), *but faith which works by love,* <sup><440></sup>Galatians 5:6. Why should we burden them with the law of Moses, as necessary to their salvation, when it is not that, but the gospel of Christ, that is necessary both to our salvation and theirs?”

**II.** An account of what Barnabas and Paul said in this synod, which did not need to be related, for they only gave in a narrative of what was recorded in the foregoing chapters, *what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them*, v. 12. This they had given in to the church at Antioch (<sup><440></sup>Acts 14:27), *to their brethren by the way* (<sup><440></sup>Acts 15:3), and now again to the synod; and it was very proper to be given in here. That which was contended for was that the Gentiles ought to submit to the law of Moses; now, in opposition to this, Paul and Barnabas undertake to show, by a plain relation of matters of fact, that God owned the preaching of the pure gospel to them without the law, and therefore to press the law upon them now was to undo what God had done. Observe,

**1.** What account they gave; they declared, or opened in order, and with all the magnifying and affecting circumstances, what glorious miracles, what signs and wonders, *God had wrought among the Gentiles by them*, what confirmation he had given to their preaching by miracles wrought in the kingdom of nature, and what success he had given to it by miracles wrought in the kingdom of grace. Thus God had honoured these apostles whom Jewish teachers condemned, and had thus honoured the Gentiles whom they contemned. What need had they of any other advocate when God himself pleaded their cause? The conversion of the Gentiles was itself a wonder, all things considered, no less than a miracle. Now if *they*

received the Holy Ghost by the hearing of faith, why should they be embarrassed with *the works of the law*? See <sup><HRP></sup>Galatians 3:2.

2. What attention was given to them: *All the multitude* (who, though they had not voted, yet came together to hear what was said) *kept silence, and gave audience to Paul and Barnabas*; it should seem they took more notice of their narrative than they did of all the arguments that were offered. As in natural philosophy and medicine nothing is so satisfactory as experiments, and in law nothing is so satisfactory as cases adjudged, so in the things of God the best explication of the word of grace is the accounts given of the operations of the Spirit of grace; to these the multitude will with silence give audience. Those that fear God will most readily hear those that can tell them *what God has done for their souls*, or by their means, <sup><H66></sup>Psalm 66:16.

III. The speech which James made to the synod. He did not interrupt Paul and Barnabas, though, it is likely, he had before heard their narrative, but let them go on with it, for the edification of the company, and that they might have it from the first and best hand; but, *after they had held their peace*, then James stood up. *You may all prophesy one by one*, <sup><H41></sup>1 Corinthians 14:31. God is the God of order. He let Paul and Barnabas say what they had to say, and then he made the application of it. The hearing of variety of ministers may be of use when one truth does not drive out, but clench, another.

1. He addresses himself respectfully to those present: “*Men and brethren, hearken unto me*. You are men, and therefore, it is to be hoped, will hear reason; you are my brethren, and therefore will hear me with candour. We are all brethren, and equally concerned in this cause that nothing be done to the dishonour of Christ and the uneasiness of Christians.”

2. He refers to what Peter had said concerning the conversion of the Gentiles (v. 14): “*Simeon*” (that is, Simon Peter) “*hath declared*, and opened the matter to you *how God at the first did visit the Gentiles*, in Cornelius and his friends, who were the first-fruits of the Gentile show, when the gospel began first to spread, presently the Gentiles were invited to come and take the benefit of it;” and James observes here,

(1.) That the *grace of God* was the origin of it; it was God *that visited the Gentiles*; and it was a kind visit. Had they been left to themselves, they would never have visited him, but the acquaintance began on his part; he

not only *visited and redeemed his people*, but visited and redeemed those that were *lo amminot a people*.

(2.) that the glory of God was the end of it: it was *to take out of them a people for his name*, who should glorify him, and in whom he would be glorified. As of old he took the Jews, so now the Gentiles, *to be to him for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory*, <sup><2431></sup>Jeremiah 13:11. Let all the people of God remember that therefore they are thus dignified in God, that God may be glorified in them.

3. He confirms this with a quotation out of the Old Testament: he could not prove the calling of the Gentiles by a vision, as Peter could, nor by miracles wrought by his hand, as Paul and Barnabas could, but he would prove that it was foretold in the Old Testament, and therefore it must be fulfilled, v. 15. *To this agree the words of the prophets*; most of the Old-Testament prophets spoke more or less of the calling in of the Gentiles, even Moses himself, <sup><510></sup>Romans 10:19. It was the general expectation of the pious Jews that the Messiah should be *a light to enlighten the Gentiles* (<sup><412></sup>Luke 2:32): but James waives the more illustrious prophecies of this, and pitches upon one that seemed more obscure: *It is written*, <sup><301></sup>Amos 9:11, 12, where is foretold,

(1.) The setting up of the kingdom of the Messiah (v. 16): *I will raise up the tabernacle of David, that is fallen*. The covenant was made with David and his seed; but the house and family of David are here called his *tabernacle*, because David in his beginning was a shepherd, and dwelt in tents, and his house, that had been as a stately palace, had become a mean and despicable tabernacle, reduced in a manner to its small beginning. This tabernacle was ruined and *fallen down*; there had not been for many ages a king of the house of David; *the sceptre had departed from Judah*, the royal family was sunk and buried in obscurity, and, as it should seem, not enquired after. But *God will return, and will build it again*, raise it out of its ruins, a phoenix out of its ashes; and this was now lately fulfilled, when our Lord Jesus was raised out of that family, had *the throne of his father David given him*, with a promise *that he should reign over the house of Jacob for ever*, <sup><412></sup>Luke 1:32, 33. And, when *the tabernacle of David* was thus rebuilt in Christ, all the rest of it was, not many years after, wholly extirpated and cut off, as was also the nation of the Jews itself, and all their genealogies were lost. The church of Christ may be called the tabernacle of David. This may sometimes be brought very low,

and may seem to be in ruins, but it shall be built again, its withering interests shall revive; it is *cast down, but not destroyed*: even dry bones are made to live.

**(2.)** The bringing in of the Gentiles as the effect and consequence of this (v. 17): *That the residue of men might seek after the Lord*; not the Jews only, who thought they had the monopoly of the tabernacle of David, but *the residue of men*, such as had hitherto been left out of the pale of the visible church; they must now, upon this re-edifying of the tabernacle of David, be brought *to seek after the Lord*, and to enquire how they may obtain his favour. When David's tabernacle is set up, they *shall seek the Lord their God, and David their king*, ~~2835~~Hosea 3:5; ~~2809~~Jeremiah 30:9. *Then Israel shall possess the remnant of Edom* (so it is in the Hebrew); but the Jews called all the Gentiles *Edomites*, and therefore the Septuagint leave out the particular mention of Edom, and read it just as it is here, *that the residue of men might seek* (James here adds, *after the Lord*), *and all the Gentiles, or heathen, upon whom my name is called*. The Jews were for many ages so peculiarly favoured that the residue of men seemed neglected; but now God will have an eye to them, and his name shall be called upon by the Gentiles; his name shall be declared and published among them, and they shall be brought both to know his name and to call upon it: they shall call themselves the people of God, and he shall call them so; and thus, by consent of both parties, *his name is called upon them*. This promise we may depend upon the fulfilling of in its season; and now it begins to be fulfilled, for it is added, *saith the Lord, who doeth this; who doeth all these things* (so the Seventy); and the apostle here: *he saith it who doeth it*, who therefore said it because he was determined to do it; and who therefore does it because he hath said it; for though with us saying and doing are two things they are not so with God. The uniting of *Jews and Gentiles in one body*, and all those things that were done in order to it, which were here foretold, were,

**[1.]** What God did: *This was the Lord's doing*, whatever instruments were employed in it: and,

**[2.]** It was what God delighted in, and was well pleased with; for he is the God of the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, and it is his honour *to be rich in mercy to all that call upon him*.

**4.** He resolves it into the purpose and counsel of God (v. 18): *Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world*. He not only

foretold the calling of the Gentiles many ages ago by the prophets (and therefore it ought not to be a surprise or stumbling-block to us), but he foresaw and foreordained it in his eternal counsels, which are unquestionably wise and unalterably firm. It is an excellent maxim here laid down concerning all God's works, both of providence and grace, in the natural and spiritual kingdom, that they were all *known unto him from the beginning of the world*, from the time he first began to work, which supposes his knowing them (as other scriptures speak) *from before the foundation of the world*, and therefore from all eternity. Note, Whatever God does, he did before design and determine to do; for he works all, not only according to his will, but *according to the counsel of his will*: he not only *does whatever he determined* (<sup>136</sup> Psalm 135:6), which is more than we can do (our purposes are frequently broken off, and our measures broken), but he *determined whatever he does*. Whatever he may say, to prove us, *he himself knows what he will do*. We know not our works beforehand, but must *do as occasion shall serve*, <sup>917</sup> 1 Samuel 10:7. What we shall do in such or such a case we cannot tell till it comes to the setting to; but *known unto God are all his works*; in the volume of his book (called *the scriptures of truth*, <sup>272</sup> Daniel 10:21) they are all written in order, without any erasure or interlining (<sup>917</sup> Psalm 40:7); and all God's works will, in the day of review, be found to agree exactly with his counsels, without the least error or variation. We are poor short-sighted creatures; the wisest men can see but a little way before them, and not at all with any certainty; but this is our comfort, that, whatever uncertainty we are at, there is an infallible certainty in the divine prescience: *known unto God are all his works*.

**5.** He gives his advice what was to be done in the present case, as the matter now stood with reference *to the Gentiles* (v. 19): *My sentence is; ego krino* I give it as my opinion, or judgment; not as having authority over the rest, but as being an adviser with them. Now his advice is,

**(1.)** That circumcision and the observance of the ceremonial law be by no means imposed upon the Gentile converts; no, not so much as recommended nor mentioned to them. “There are many from among the Gentiles that are turned to God in Christ, and we hope there will be many more. Now I am clearly for using them with all possible tenderness, and putting no manner of hardship or discouragement upon them,” *me parenochlein* “not to give them any molestation nor disturbance, nor suggest any thing to them that may be disquieting, or raise scruples in their

minds, or perplex them.” Note, Great care must be taken not to discourage nor disquiet young converts with matters of *doubtful disputation*. Let the essentials of religion, which an awakened conscience will readily receive, be first impressed deeply upon them, and these will satisfy them and make them easy; and let not things foreign and circumstantial be urged upon them, which will but trouble them. *The kingdom of God*, in which they are to be trained up, *is not meat and drink*, neither the opposition nor the imposition of indifferent things, which will but trouble them; *but it is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost*, which we are sure will trouble nobody.

(2.) That yet it would be well that in some things, which gave most offence to the Jews, the Gentiles should comply with them. Because they must not humour them so far as to be circumcised, and keep the whole law, it does not therefore follow that they must act in a continual contradiction to them, and study how to provoke them. It will please the Jews (and, if a little thing will oblige them, better do so than cross them) if the Gentile converts abstain,

[1.] *From pollutions of idols, and from fornication*, which are two bad things, and always to be abstained from; but writing to them particularly and expressly to abstain from them (because in these things the Jews were jealous of the Gentile converts, lest they should transgress) would very much gratify the Jews; not but that the apostles, both in preaching and writing to the Gentiles that embraced Christianity, were careful to warn against, *First, Pollutions of idols*, that they should have no manner of fellowship with idolaters in their idolatrous worships, and particularly not in the feasts they held upon their sacrifices. See ~~404~~ 1 Corinthians 10:14, etc.; ~~404~~ 2 Corinthians 6:14, etc. *Secondly, Fornication, and all manner of uncleanness*. How large, how pressing, is Paul in his cautions against this sin! ~~404~~ 1 Corinthians 6:9-15; ~~404~~ Ephesians 5:3, etc. But the Jews, who were willing to think the worst of those they did not like, suggested that these were things in which the Gentiles, even after conversion, allowed themselves, and the apostle of the Gentiles connived at it. Now, to obviate this suggestion, and to leave no room for this calumny, James advises that, besides the private admonitions which were given them by their ministers, they should be publicly warned *to abstain from pollutions of idols and from fornication* that herein they should be very circumspect, and should avoid all appearances of these two evils, which would be in so particular a manner offensive to the Jews.



[2.] *From things strangled, and from blood*, which, though not evil in themselves, as the other two, nor designed to be always abstained from, as those were, had been forbidden by *the precepts of Noah* (~~1000~~Genesis 9:4.), before the giving of the law of Moses; and the Jews had a great dislike to them, and to all those that took a liberty to use them; and therefore, to avoid giving offence, let the Gentile converts abridge themselves of their liberty herein, ~~400~~1 Corinthians 8:9, 13. Thus we must *become all things to all men*.

6. He gives a reason for his advice that great respect ought to be shown to the Jews for they have been so long accustomed to the solemn injunctions of the ceremonial law that they must be borne with, if they cannot presently come off from them (v. 21): *For Moses hath of old those that preach him in every city*, his writings (a considerable part of which is the ceremonial law) *being read in the synagogues every sabbath day*. “You cannot blame them if they have a great veneration for the law of Moses; for besides that they are very sure God spoke to Moses,”

(1.) “Moses is continually preached to them, and they are called upon *to remember the law of Moses*,” ~~300~~Malachi 4:4. Note, Even that word of God which is written to us should also be preached: those that have the scriptures have still need of ministers to help them to understand and apply the scriptures.

(2.) “His writings are read in a solemn religious manner, *in their synagogues*, and on *the sabbath day*, in the place and at the time of their meetings for the worship of God; so that from their childhood they have been trained up in a regard to the law of Moses; the observance of it is a part of their religion.”

(3.) “This has been done *of old time*; they have received from their fathers an honour for Moses; they have antiquity for it.”

(4.) “This had been done *in every city*, wherever there are any Jews, so that none of them can be ignorant what stress that law laid upon these things: and therefore, though the gospel has set us free from these things, yet they cannot be blamed if they are loth to part with them, and cannot of a sudden be persuaded to look upon those things as needless and indifferent which they, and their fathers before them, had been so long taught, and taught of God too, to place religion in. We must therefore give them time, must meet them half-way; they must be borne with awhile, and brought on

gradually, and we must comply with them as far as we can without betraying our gospel liberty.” Thus does this apostle show the spirit of a moderator, that is, a spirit of moderation, being careful to give no offence either to Jew or Gentile, and contriving, as much as may be, to please both sides and provoke neither. Note, We are not to think it strange if people be wedded to customs which they have had transmitted to them from their fathers, and which they have been educated in an opinion of as sacred; and therefore allowances must be made in such cases, and not rigour used.

## ⌄ ACTS 15:22-35

### DECISION OF THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

We have here the result of the consultation that was held at Jerusalem about the imposing of the ceremonial law upon the Gentiles. Much more, it is likely, was said about it than is here recorded; but at length it was brought to a head, and the advice which James gave was universally approved and agreed to *nemine contradicente unanimously*; and letters were accordingly sent by messengers of their own to the Gentile converts, acquainting them with their sentiments in this matter, which would be a great confirmation to them against the false teachers. Now observe here,

**I.** The choice of the delegates that were to be sent with Paul and Barnabas on this errand; not as if they had any suspicion of the fidelity of these great men, and could not trust them with their letters, nor as if they thought that those to whom they sent them would suspect them to have altered any thing in their letter; no, their charity thought no such evil concerning men of such tried integrity; but,

**1.** They thought fit *to send men of their own company to Antioch, with Paul and Barnabas, v. 22.* This was agreed to by *the apostles and elders, with the whole church*, who, it is likely, undertook to bear their charges, ⌄ 1 Corinthians 9:7. They sent these messengers,

**(1.)** To show their respect to the church at Antioch, as a sister-church, though a younger sister, and that they looked upon it as upon the same level with them; as also that they were desirous further to know their state.

(2.) To encourage Paul and Barnabas, and to make their journey home the more pleasant (for it is likely they travelled on foot) by sending such excellent men to bear them company; *amicus pro vehicula friend instead of a carriage.*

(3.) To put a reputation upon the letters they carried, that it might appear a solemn embassy, and so much the more regard might be paid to the message, which was likely to meet with opposition from some.

(4.) To keep up *the communion of the saints*, and cultivate an acquaintance between churches and ministers that were at a distance from each other, and to show *that, though they were many, yet they were one.*

2. Those they sent were not inferior persons, who might serve to carry the letters, and attest the receipt of them from the apostles; but *they were chosen men, and chief men among the brethren*, men of eminent gifts, graces, and usefulness; for these are the things which denominate men chief among the brethren, and qualify them to be the messengers of the churches. They are here named: *Judas*, who was called *Barsabas* (probably the brother of that Joseph who was called *Barsabas*, that was a candidate for the apostleship, <sup>403</sup>Acts 1:23), and *Silas*. The character which these men had in the church at Jerusalem would have some influence upon those that came from Judea, as those false teachers did, and engage them to pay the more deference to the message that was sent by them.

II. The drawing up of the letters, circular letters, that were to be sent to the churches, to notify the sense of the synod in this matter.

1. Here is a very condescending obliging preamble to this decree, v. 23. There is nothing in it haughty or assuming, but,

(1.) That which intimates the humility of the apostles, that they join *the elders and brethren* in commission with them, the ministers, the ordinary Christians, whom they had advised with in this case, as they used to do in other cases. Though never men were so qualified as they were for a monarchical power and authority in the church, nor had such a commission as they had, yet their decrees run not, “We, the apostles, Christ's vicars upon earth, and pastors of all the pastors of the churches” (as the pope styles himself), “and sole judges in all matters of faith;” but *the apostles, and elders, and brethren*, agree in their orders. Herein they

remembered the instructions their Master gave them (~~418~~ Matthew 23:8): *Be not you called Rabbi; for you are all brethren.*

(2.) That which bespeaks their respect to the churches they wrote to; they *send to them greeting*, wish them health and happiness and joy, and call them *brethren of the Gentiles*, thereby owning their admission into the church, and giving them the right hand of fellowship: “You are our brethren, though Gentiles; for we meet in Christ, *the first born among many brethren*, in God our common Father.” Now that *the Gentiles are fellow-heirs and of the same body*, they are to be countenanced and encouraged, and called brethren.

2. Here is a just and severe rebuke to the judaizing teachers (v. 24): “*We have heard that certain who went out from us have troubled you with words*, and we are very much concerned to hear it; now this is to let them know that those who preached this doctrine were false teachers, both as they produced a false commission and as they taught a false doctrine.”

(1.) They did a great deal of wrong to the apostles and ministers at Jerusalem, in pretending that they had instructions from them to impose the ceremonial law upon the Gentiles, when there was no colour for such a pretension. “*They went out from us* indeed they were such as belonged to our church, of which, when they had a mind to travel, we gave them perhaps a testimonial; but, as for their urging the law of Moses upon you, we *gave them no such commandment*, nor had we ever thought of such a thing, nor given them the least occasion to use our names in it.” It is no new thing for apostolical authority to be pleaded in defence of those doctrines and practices for which yet the apostles gave neither command nor encouragement.

(2.) They did a great deal of wrong to the Gentile converts, in saying, *You must be circumcised, and must keep the law.*

[1.] It perplexed them: “*They have troubled you with words*, have occasioned disturbance and disquietment to you. You depended upon those who told you, *If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ you shall be saved*; and now you are startled by those that tell you *you must keep the law of Moses or you cannot be saved*, by which you see yourselves drawn into a snare. They trouble you with wordswords, and nothing elsemere wordssound, but no substance.” How has the church been troubled with words, by the pride of men that loved to hear themselves talk!

[2.] It endangered them; they *subverted* their souls, put them into disorder, and pulled down that which had been built up. They took them off from pursuing pure Christianity, and minding the business of that, by filling their heads with the necessity of circumcision, and the law of Moses, which were nothing to the purpose.

3. Here is an honourable testimony given of the messengers by whom these letters were sent.

(1.) Of Paul and Barnabas, whom these judaizing teachers had opposed and censured as having done their work by the halves, because they had brought the Gentile converts to Christianity only, and not to Judaism. Let them say what they will of these men,

[1.] “They are men that are dear to us; they are *our beloved Barnabas and Paul* men whom we have a value for, a kindness for, a concern for.” Sometimes it is good for those that are of eminence to express their esteem, not only for the despised truth of Christ, but for the despised preachers and defenders of that truth, to encourage them, and weaken the hands of their opposers.

[2.] “They are men that have signalized themselves in the service of Christ, and therefore have deserved well of all the churches: they are men *that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ* (v. 26), and therefore are worthy of double honour, and cannot be suspected of having sought any secular advantage to themselves; for they have ventured their all for Christ, have engaged in the most dangerous services, as good soldiers of Christ, and not only in laborious services.” It is not likely that such faithful confessors should be unfaithful preachers. Those that urged circumcision did it to avoid persecution (~~and~~ Galatians 6:12, 13); those that opposed it knew they thereby exposed themselves to persecution; and which of these were most likely to be in the right?

(2.) Of Judas and Silas: “*They are chosen men* (v. 25), and they are men that have heard our debates, and are perfectly apprized of the matter, and will *tell you the same things by mouth*,” v. 27. What is of use to us it is good to have both in writing and by word of mouth, that we may have the advantage both of reading and of hearing it. The apostles refer them to the bearers for a further account of their judgment and their reasons, and the bearers will refer them to their letters for the certainty of the determination.

**4.** Here is the direction given what to require from the Gentile converts, where observe,

**(1.)** The matter of the injunction, which is according to the advice given by James, that, to avoid giving offence to the Jews,

**[1.]** They should never eat any thing that they knew had been offered in sacrifice to an idol, but look upon it as, though clean in itself, yet thereby polluted to them. This prohibition was afterwards in part taken off, for they were allowed to eat whatever was sold in the shambles, or set before them at their friend's table, though it had been offered to idols, except when there was danger of giving offence by it, that is, of giving occasion either to a weak Christian to think the worse of our Christianity, or to a wicked heathen to think the better of his idolatry; and in these cases it is *good to forbear*, ~~412~~ 1 Corinthians 10:25, etc. This to us is an antiquated case.

**[2.]** *That they should not eat blood*, nor drink it; but avoid every thing that looked cruel and barbarous in that ceremony which had been of so long standing.

**[3.]** *That they should not eat any thing that was strangled*, or died of itself, or had not the blood let out.

**[4.]** That they should be very strict in censuring those that *were guilty of fornication*, or marrying within the degrees prohibited by the Levitical law, which, some think, is principally intended here. See ~~413~~ 1 Corinthians 5:1. Dr. Hammond states this matter thus: The judaizing teachers would have the Gentile converts submit to all that those submitted to whom they called the proselytes of righteousness, *to be circumcised and keep the whole law*; but the apostles required no more of them than what was required of the proselytes of the gate, which was to observe *the seven precepts of the sons of Noah*, which, he thinks, are here referred to. But the only ground of this decree being in complaisance to the rigid Jews that had embraced the Christian faith, and, except in that one case of scandal, all meats being pronounced free and indifferent to all Christians as soon as the reason of the decree ceased, which, at furthest, was after the destruction of Jerusalem, the obligation of it ceased likewise. "These things are in a particular manner offensive to the Jews, and therefore do not disoblige them herein for the present; in a little time the Jews will incorporate with the Gentiles, and then the danger is over."

(2.) The manner in which it is worded.

[1.] They express themselves with something of authority, that what they wrote might be received with respect, and deference paid to it: *It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us*, that is, to us under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, and by direction from him: not only the apostles, but others, were endued with spiritual gifts extraordinary, and knew more of the mind of God than any since those gifts ceased can pretend to; their infallibility gave an incontestable authority to their decrees, and they would not order any thing because *it seemed good to them*, but that they knew it first *seemed good to the Holy Ghost*. Or it refers to what the Holy Ghost had determined in this matter formerly. When the Holy Ghost descended upon the apostles, he endued them with the gift of tongues, in order to their preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, which was a plain indication of God's purpose to call them in. When the Holy Ghost descended upon Cornelius and his friends, upon Peter's preaching, it was plain that Christ designed the taking down of the Jewish pale, within which they fancied the spirit had been enclosed.

[2.] They express themselves with abundance of tenderness and fatherly concern. *First*, They are afraid of burdening them: *We will lay upon you no greater burden*. So far were they from delighting to impose upon them that they dreaded nothing so much as imposing too far upon them, so as to discourage them at their setting out. *Secondly*, They impose upon them *no other than necessary things*. "The avoiding of *fornication* is necessary to all Christians at all times; the avoiding of *things strangled*, and of *blood*, and of *things offered to idols*, is necessary at this time, for the keeping up of a good understanding between you and the Jews, and the preventing of offence;" and as long as it continues necessary for that end, and no longer, it is enjoined. Note, Church-rulers should impose only necessary things, things which Christ has made our duty, which have a real tendency to the edification of the church, and, as here, to the uniting of good Christians. If they impose things only to show their own authority, and to try people's obedience, they forget that they have not authority to make new laws, but only to see that the laws of Christ be duly executed, and to enforce the observance of them. *Thirdly*, They enforce their order with a commendation of those that shall comply with it, rather than with the condemnation of those that shall transgress it. They do not conclude, "From which if you do not keep yourselves, you shall be an anathema, you shall be cast out of the church, and accursed," according to the style of

after-councils, and particularly that of Trent; but “*From which if you keep yourselves, as we do not question but you will, you will do well; it will be for the glory of God, the furtherance of the gospel, the strengthening of the hands of your brethren, and your own credit and comfort.*” It is all sweetness and love and good humour, such as became the followers of him who, when he called us to take his yoke upon us, assured us we should find him *meek and lowly in heart*. The difference of the style of the true apostles from that of the false is very observable. Those that were for imposing the ceremonial laws were positive and imperious: *Except you keep it, you cannot be saved* (v. 1), you are excommunicated *ipso facto* *once, and delivered to Satan*. The apostles of Christ, who only recommend necessary things, are mild and gentle: “*From which if you keep yourselves, you will do well, and as becomes you. Fare ye well; we are hearty well-wishers to your honour and peace.*”

**III.** The delivering of the letters, and how the messengers disposed of themselves.

**1.** *When they were dismissed*, had had their audience of leave of the apostles (it is probable that they were dismissed with prayer, and a solemn blessing in the name of the Lord, and with instructions and encouragements in their work), *They then came to Antioch*; they staid no longer at Jerusalem than till their business was done, and then came back, and perhaps were met at their return by those that brought them on their way at their setting out; for those that have taken pains in public service ought to be countenanced and encouraged.

**2.** As soon as they came to Antioch, *they gathered the multitude together, and delivered the epistle to them* (v. 30, 31), that they might all know what it was that was forbidden them, and might observe these orders, which would be no difficulty for them to do, most of them having been, before their conversion to Christ, proselytes of the gate, who had laid themselves under these restrictions already. But this was not all; it was that they might know that *no more* than this was forbidden them, that it was no longer a sin to eat swine's flesh, no longer a pollution to touch a grave or a dead body.

**3.** The people were wonderfully pleased with the orders that came from Jerusalem (v. 31): *They rejoiced for the consolation*; and a great consolation it was to the multitude,



(1.) That they were confirmed in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, and were not burdened with that, as those upstart teachers would have had them to be. It was a comfort to them to hear that the carnal ordinances were no longer imposed on them, which perplexed the conscience, but could not purify nor pacify it.

(2.) That those who troubled their minds with an attempt to force circumcision upon them were hereby for the present silenced and put to confusion, the fraud of their pretensions to an apostolical warrant being now discovered.

(3.) That the Gentiles were hereby encouraged to receive the gospel, and those that had received it to adhere to it.

(4.) That the peace of the church was hereby restored, and that removed which threatened a division. All this was consolation which they rejoiced in, and blessed God for.

4. They got the strange ministers that came from Jerusalem to give them each a sermon, and more, v. 32. Judas and Silas, *being prophets also themselves*, endued with the Holy Ghost, and called to the work, and being likewise entrusted by the apostles to deliver some things relating to this matter by word of mouth, *exhorted the brethren with many words*, and *confirmed them*. Even those that had the constant preaching of Paul and Barnabas, yet were glad of the help of Judas and Silas; the diversity of the gifts of ministers is of use to the church. Observe what is the work of ministers with those that are in Christ.

(1.) To confirm them, by bringing them to see more reason both for their faith in Christ and their obedience to him; to confirm their choice of Christ and their resolutions for Christ.

(2.) To exhort them to perseverance, and to the particular duties required of them: to quicken them to that which is good, and direct them in it. They comforted the brethren (so it may be rendered), and this would contribute to the confirming of them; for the joy of the Lord will be our strength. They exhorted them with many words; they used a very great copiousness and variety of expression. One word would affect one, and another another; and therefore, though what they had to say might have been summed up in a few words, yet it was for the edification of the church that

they used *many words*, *dia logou pollou* with much speech, much reasoning; *precept must be upon precept*.

**5.** The dismissal of the Jerusalem ministers, v. 33. When they had *spent some time among them* (so it might be read), *poiesantes chronon* having made some stay, and having made it to good purpose, not having trifled away time, but having filled it up, they were let in peace from the brethren at Antioch, to the apostles at Jerusalem, with all possible expressions of kindness and respect; they thanked them for their coming and pains, and the good service they had done, wished them their health and a good journey home, and committed them to the custody of the peace of God.

**6.** The continuance of Silas, notwithstanding, together with Paul and Barnabas, at Antioch.

**(1.)** Silas, when it came to the setting to, would not go back with Judas to Jerusalem, but let him go home by himself, and chose rather to *abide still at Antioch*, v. 34. And we have no reason at all to blame him for it, though we know not the reason that moved him to it. I am apt to think the congregations at Antioch were both more large and more lively than those at Jerusalem, and that this tempted him to stay there, and he did well: so did Judas, who, notwithstanding this, returned to his post of service at Jerusalem.

**(2.)** Paul and Barnabas, though their work lay chiefly among the Gentiles, yet continued for some time in Antioch, being pleased with the society of the ministers and people there, which, it should seem by divers passages, was more than ordinarily inviting. They continued there, not to take their pleasure, but *teaching and preaching the word of God*. Antioch, being the chief city of Syria, it is probable there was a great resort of Gentiles thither from all parts upon one account or other, as there was of Jews to Jerusalem; so that in preaching there they did in effect preach to many nations, for they preached to those who would carry the report of what they preached to many nations, and thereby prepare them for the apostles' coming in person to preach to them. And thus they were not only not idle at Antioch, but were serving their main intention.

**(3.)** There were *many others also* there, labouring at the same oar. The multitude of workmen in Christ's vineyard does not give us a writ of ease. Even where there are many others labouring in the word and doctrine, yet

there may be opportunity for us; the zeal and usefulness of others should excite us, not lay us asleep.

## ACTS 15:36-41

### DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN PAUL AND BARNABAS

We have seen one unhappy difference among the brethren, which was of a public nature, brought to a good issue; but here we have a private quarrel between two ministers, no less men than Paul and Barnabas, not compromised indeed, yet ending well.

**I.** Here is a good proposal Paul made to Barnabas to go and review their work among the Gentiles and renew it, to take a circuit among the churches they had planted, and see what progress the gospel made among them. Antioch was now a safe and quiet harbour for them: they had there no adversary nor evil occurrent; but Paul remembered that they only put in there to refit and refresh themselves, and therefore begins now to think of putting to sea again; and, having been in winter quarters long enough, he is for taking the field again, and making another campaign, in a vigorous prosecution of this holy war against Satan's kingdom. Paul remembered that the work appointed him was afar off among the Gentiles, and therefore he is here meditating a second expedition among them to do the same work, though to encounter the same difficulties; and this *some days after*, for his active spirit could not bear to be long out of work; no, nor his bold and daring spirit to be long out of danger. Observe,

**1.** To whom he makes this proposal to Barnabas, his old friend and fellow-labourer; he invites his company and help in this work. We have need one of another, and may be in many ways serviceable one to another; and therefore should be forward both to borrow and lend assistance. Two are better than one. Every soldier has his comrade.

**2.** For whom the visit is designed: "Let us not presently begin new work, nor break up new ground; but let us take a view of the fields we have sown. *Come, and let us get up early to the vineyards, let us see if the vine flourish,* <sup>207</sup> Song of Solomon 7:12. *Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord.*" Observe, He calls all the Christians brethren, and not ministers only; for, *Have we not*

*all one Father?* He has a concern for them in *every city*, even where the brethren were fewest and poorest, and most persecuted and despised; yet let us visit them. Wherever we have *preached the word of the Lord*, let us go and water the seed sown. Note, Those that have preached the gospel should visit those to whom they have preached it. As we must look after our praying, and hear what answer God gives to that; so we must look after our preaching, and see what success that has. Faithful ministers cannot but have a particular tender concern for those to whom they have preached the gospel, that they may not bestow upon them labour in vain. See <sup>1</sup> Thessalonians 3:5, 6.

**3.** What was intended in this visit: “Let us *see how they do*,” *pos echousi how it is with them*. It was not merely a compliment that he designed, nor did he take such a journey with a bare *How do you do?* No, he would visit them that he might acquaint himself with their case, and impart unto them such spiritual gifts as were suited to it; as the physician visits his recovering patient, that he may prescribe what is proper for the perfecting of his cure, and the preventing of a relapse. Let us see how they do, that is,

**(1.)** What spirit they are of, how they stand affected, and how they behave themselves; it is probable that they frequently heard from them, “But let us go and see them; let us go and see whether they hold fast what we preached to them, and live up to it, that we may endeavour to reduce them if we find them wandering, to confirm them if we find them wavering, and to comfort them if we find them steady.”

**(2.)** What state they are in, whether the churches have rest and liberty, or whether they are not in trouble or distress, that we may rejoice with them if they rejoice, and caution them against security, and may weep with them if they weep, and comfort them under the cross, and may know the better how to pray for them.

**II.** The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas about an assistant; it was convenient to have a young man with them that should attend on them and minister to them, and be a witness of their *doctrine, manner of life, and patience*, and that should be fitted and trained up for further service, by being occasionally employed in the present service. Now, 1. Barnabas would have his nephew John, whose surname was Mark, to go along with them, v. 37. He determined to take him, because he was his relation, and, it is likely, was brought up under him, and he had a kindness for him, and

was solicitous for his welfare. We should suspect ourselves of partiality, and guard against it in preferring our relations.

**2.** Paul opposed it (v. 38): *He thought not good to take him with them, **ouk exiou** he did not think him worthy of the honour, nor fit for the service, who had departed from them, clandestinely as it should seem, without their knowledge, or wilfully, without their consent, from Pamphylia (~~4133~~Acts 13:13), and went not with them to the work, because he was either lazy and would not take the pains that must be taken, or cowardly and would not run the hazard. He run his colours just as they were going to engage. It is probable that he promised very fair now that he would not do so again. But Paul thought it was not fit he should be thus honoured who had forfeited his reputation, nor thus employed who had betrayed his trust; at least, not till he had been longer tried. If a man deceive me once, it is his fault; but, if twice, it is my own, for trusting him. Solomon saith, *Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a broken tooth, and a foot out of joint, which will hardly be used again,* ~~4159~~Proverbs 25:19.*

**III.** The issue of this disagreement: it came to such a height that they separated upon it. The contention, the *paroxysm* (so the word is), the fit of passion which this threw them both into, was so sharp that they *departed asunder one from the other*. Barnabas was peremptory that he would not go with Paul unless they took John Mark with them; Paul was as peremptory that he would not go if John did go with them. Neither would yield, and therefore there is no remedy but they must part. Now here is that which is very humbling, and just matter of lamentation, and yet very instructive. For we see,

**1.** That the best of men are but men, *subject to like passions* as we are, as these two good men had expressly owned concerning themselves (~~4445~~Acts 14:15), and now it appeared too true. I doubt there was (as usually there is in such contentions) a *fault on both sides*; perhaps Paul was too severe upon the young man, and did not allow his fault the extenuation it was capable of, did not consider what a useful woman his mother was in Jerusalem (~~4422~~Acts 12:12), nor make the allowances he might have made to Barnabas's natural affection. But it was Barnabas's fault that he took this into consideration, in a case wherein the interest of Christ's kingdom was concerned, and indulged it too much. And they were certainly both in fault to be hot as to let the contention be sharp (it is to be feared they gave one another some hard words), as also to be so stiff as each to stick resolutely

to his opinion, and neither to yield. It is a pity that they did not refer the matter to a third person, or that some friend did not interpose to prevent its coming to an open rupture. Is there never a wise man among them to interpose his good offices, and to accommodate the matter, and to put them in mind of the Canaanite and the Perizzite that were *now in the land*, and that not only Jews and heathens, but the false brethren among themselves, would warm their hands at the flames of the contention between Paul and Barnabas? We must own it was their infirmity, and is recorded for our admonition; not that we must make use of it to excuse our own intemperate heats and passions, or to rebate the edge of our sorrow and shame for them; we must not say, "What if I was in a passion, were not Paul and Barnabas so?" No; but it must check our censures of others, and moderate them. If good men are soon put into a passion, we must make the best of it, it was the infirmity once of two of the best men that ever the world had. Repentance teaches us to be severe in reflections upon ourselves; but charity teaches us to be candid in our reflections upon others. It is only Christ's example that is a copy without a blot.

**2.** That we are not to think it strange if there be differences among wise and good men; we were told before that such offences would come, and here is an instance of it. Even those that are united to one and the same Jesus, and sanctified by one and the same Spirit, have different apprehensions, different opinions, different views, and different sentiments in points of prudence. It will be so while we are in this state of darkness and imperfection; we shall never be all of a mind till we come to heaven, where light and love are perfect. That is *charity* which *never fails*.

**3.** That these differences often prevail so far as to occasion separations. Paul and Barnabas, who were not separated by the persecutions of the unbelieving Jews, nor the impositions of the believing Jews, were yet separated by an unhappy disagreement between themselves. O the mischief that even the poor and weak remainders of pride and passion, that are found even in good men, do in the world, do in the church! Now wonder the consequences are so fatal where they reign.

**IV.** The good that was brought out of this evilmeat out of the eater, and sweetness out of the strong. It was strange that even the sufferings of the apostles (as <sup>3012</sup>Philippians 1:12), but much more strange that even the quarrels of the apostles, should tend to the *furtherance of the gospel of*

*Christ*; yet so it proved here. God would not permit such things to be, if he knew not how to make them to serve his own purposes.

**1.** More places are hereby visited. Barnabas went one way; he sailed to Cyprus (v. 39), that famous island where they began their work (<sup><41C3></sup>Acts 13:4), and which was *his own country*, <sup><40B5></sup>Acts 4:36. Paul went another way into Cilicia, which was *his own country*, <sup><41C3></sup>Acts 21:39. Each seems to be influenced by his affection to his native soil, as usual (*Nescio quif natale solum dulcedine cunctos ducit* *There is something that attaches us all to our native soil*), and yet God served his own purposes by it, for the diffusing of gospel light.

**2.** More hands are hereby employed in the ministry of the gospel among the Gentiles; for,

**(1.)** John Mark, who had been an unfaithful hand, is not rejected, but is again made use of, against Paul's mind, and, for aught we know, proves a very useful and successful hand, though many think it was not the same with that Mark that wrote the gospel, and founded the church at Alexandria, and whom Peter calls his son, <sup><40B3></sup>1 Peter 5:13.

**(2.)** Silas who was a new hand, and never yet employed in that work, nor intended to be, but to return to the service of the church at Jerusalem, had not God changed his mind (v. 33, 34), he is brought in, and engaged in that noble work.

**V.** We may further observe,

**1.** That the church at Antioch seem to countenance Paul in what he did. Barnabas sailed with his nephew to Cyprus, and no notice was taken of him, nor a *bene discessita recommendation* given him. Note, Those that in their service of the church are swayed by private affections and regards forfeit public honours and respect. But, when Paul departed, he was *recommended by the brethren to the grace of God*. They thought he was in the right in refusing to make use of John Mark, and could not but blame Barnabas for insisting upon it, though he was one who had deserved well of the church (<sup><41I2></sup>Acts 11:22) before they knew Paul; and therefore they prayed publicly for Paul, and for the success of his ministry, encouraged him to go on in his work, and, though they could do nothing themselves to further him, they transferred the matter to the grace of God, leaving it to that grace both to work upon him and to work with him. Note, Those are

happy at all times, and especially in times of disagreement and contention, who are enabled so to carry themselves as not to forfeit their interest in the love and prayers of good people.

**2.** That yet Paul afterwards seems to have had, though not upon second thoughts, yet upon further trial, a better opinion of John Mark than now he had; for he writes to Timothy (~~SCM~~<sup>SCM</sup> 2 Timothy 4:11), *Take Mark and bring him with thee, for he is profitable to me for the ministry*; and he writes to the Colossians concerning Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas, that *if he came to them they should receive him, bid him welcome, and employ him* (~~SCM~~<sup>SCM</sup> Colossians 4:10), which teaches us,

**(1.)** That even those whom we justly condemn we should condemn moderately, and with a great deal of temper, because we know not but afterwards we may see cause to think better of them, and both to make use of them and make friendship with them, and we should so regulate our resentments that if it should prove so we may not afterwards be ashamed of them.

**(2.)** That even those whom we have justly condemned, if afterwards they prove more faithful, we should cheerfully receive, forgive and forget, and put a confidence in, and, as there is occasion, give a good word to.

**3.** That Paul, though he wanted his old friend and companion in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, yet went on cheerfully in his work (v. 41): *He went through Syria and Cilicia, countries which lay next to Antioch, confirming the churches*. Though we change our colleagues, we do not change our principal president. And observe, Ministers are well employed, and ought to think themselves so, and be satisfied, when they are made use of confirming those that believe, as well as in converting those that believe not.