

A Tragic Division.

Acts 15:36-41

Sunday, March 6, 2011.

I. Back to reality.

We have been on the high ground of the Lord's work through the general assembly of the church in Jerusalem. Although this counsel faced a difficult task, humanly speaking, the Lord granted a wonderful spirit of humility and unity through the work of the Holy Spirit and the exposition of His Word.

In the very nature of life, the high ground of the Lord's tangible presence and power and work in our lives is surrounded by the lowlands of the reality of our own fallen state and the troubles that beset us in a fallen world.

Similarly the deep lows of our lives are surrounded by the higher ground of tangible tokens of the Lord's presence and work in our lives. During such times we should not neglect to look for such mercies.

- A. So Moses would come down from having spent forty days in the Lord's presence on Mount Sinai to find Israel dancing around the golden calf.
- B. Elijah sank into a depression, and wanted to die, upon hearing that queen Jezebel wanted to kill him, even though he had just witnessed God's powerful work in answering him with fire in the contest with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel.
- C. Upon their return from the transfiguration of the Lord Jesus on the mountain, the Lord, Peter, James and John encounter the ugly reality of a demon possessed man; a stubborn demon who refused to be cast out by the Lord's other disciples.
- D. So here, coming of the high ground of the tangible presence and power and work of the Lord in Jerusalem, we find ourselves in the low lands of human conflict and strife resulting in the division of the close companions, Paul and Barnabas.

II. The conflict defined.

- A. Paul and Barnabas, Judas and Silas, among others, had carried the apostles' letter to the Gentile churches to the region of Northern Syria. Upon delivering the letter they settled back into Antioch which was the major city in that region. Here they ministered for some time together; Judas seems to have returned to Jerusalem with certain unnamed others.
- B. Having ministered for some time to the church in Antioch, Paul becomes concerned for the believers He and Barnabas have left behind on their first missionary journey. They too need further strengthening.
- C. Paul asks Barnabas to join him to go back to visit these churches, and Barnabas concurs. However Barnabas is determined to take John Mark with him again.
- D. Paul is just as determined not to do so. John Mark had gone with them on their first missionary journey, but had left them and returned to the church in Jerusalem after a short while. Neither side is going to give in.
- E. Paul's vision and purpose is to visit and strengthen the churches they left behind, and they don't need the company of someone who lacks the resolve and endurance to continue with them. What kind of example would that be to those

churches when Christ's ministers are like this?

- F. Barnabas is "the son of encouragement." He too has a vision and a purpose; it is larger than Paul's. It includes those who have failed on their first try, and who need to be given a second chance. It had been Barnabas who took Paul under his wing following his conversion, and introduced him to the circle of apostles in Jerusalem. Barnabas insists on this second chance for John Mark; he is not going to leave John Mark behind for having failed the first time.
- G. Paul and Barnabas part ways. It seems that they agreed to disagree and to go their separate ways. Barnabas goes to Cyprus with John Mark, and Paul chooses Silas and goes North-west into Asia Minor. Luke, the author of Acts, will travel with Paul and Silas; he will not mention Barnabas again. Barnabas leaves the stage of both sacred and secular history at this time. We do not know what happened to him after this. Both are sent out by the church in Antioch and commended to the grace of God. Acts 15:39, 40.

III. The silver lining.

Who was right in this conflict, Paul or Barnabas?

I would suggest an alternate approach to the relevance of this story. This story is ultimately not about Paul or Barnabas or John Mark; it is not about who was right. This story, as are all stories, is ultimately about the risen Lord Jesus Christ and the work that He continues to undertake following His resurrection and ascension.

Acts is about the work Jesus would continue to do in redemptive history. Acts 1:1. The question as such becomes: "What did the Lord do by way of this conflict in the history of salvation?"

- A. First let us remember that this question is to be preferred in all the conflicts and hardships of life. Life is ultimately about what Jesus is doing in and through us.
- B. The Lord doubled His work force. Two teams went out instead of one.
- C. The Lord brought the format of the teams in conformity with His own practice; He had sent His disciples out two by two. A team of three is a troublesome format; two will cling together and the third one will often feel like a useless appendage; grow discouraged or bitter, and leave.
- D. The Lord redeemed the life of John Mark as a chosen instrument for gospel ministry. We do not hear about Barnabas again, and we will hear nothing about John Mark for the next ten or so years. Then the apostle Paul, from prison in Rome, will refer to John Mark as his "fellow laborer" Col. 4:10 and Philemon 24, and as "useful for the ministry" in 2 Timothy 4:11. Peter, now in Rome, will refer to John Mark as "my son." 1 Peter 5:13.
- E. In Rome, under the tutelage of Peter, John Mark would write the first of the four gospels. If it were not for this rift, and Barnabas giving John Mark a second start in the ministry, we might not have had this gospel.
Church history records that later, John Mark became the first evangelist to Egypt and founder of the churches in Alexandria, who were noted by the Jewish writer Philo for their large numbers and level of commitment.
- F. The Lord overruled the sinful, fallen tendencies in the hearts of His servants, and He used them for the good of the unfolding of redemptive history, which is ultimately His-Story. By this we are humbled and stand indebted to the Lord.