

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

The Expanding Gospel

Acts 15:32-16:10

Intro: The church faced its greatest threat in **ch15** and it had overcome! Through the efforts of Paul and Barnabas, along with the Apostles and elders in the Jerusalem church, the gospel had been saved – the simplicity of the gospel had been preserved. A teaching had been proposed by some in the church that focused on salvation by works. This teaching was rejected as false and the original gospel was upheld as truth – justification by faith alone in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The threat was dealt with in a loving way and a serious crisis had been averted. In the after-math, Paul and Barnabas return to the church in Antioch to deliver the good news and they don't return alone.

32-35 – Judas and Silas accompanied Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch and served as visiting ministers from Jerusalem. They weren't there to analyze, criticize, supervise or even advise. They were just there to help with the work. They were recognized as prophets in the Jerusalem church and in that capacity, they brought exhortation from the Word and spiritual strength to the church. It would be understandable if the Antioch church was a little leery of them at first. The last group of men that came from Judea brought with them the potential of ruining the work of God in Antioch and beyond. But that situation was handled correctly, allowing the work of God to continue to advance.

Judas and Silas stayed there ministering “for a time.” When it was time to return to Jerusalem, Silas decided to stay and continue to serve in that congregation. As we have seen, the church in Antioch was a growing, vibrant church and there was much work to be done. Apparently, Silas possessed the cultural background that was conducive for working with and ministering to Gentiles and he felt his calling was better suited for this location. So there he stayed, assisting Paul and Barnabas and the rest of the Antioch ministry team in teaching doctrine and preaching the gospel.

36 – Now, after all the traveling and contending for the faith that Paul and Barnabas had been doing lately, you might expect them to settle into the comfortable, or at least consistent routine of ministry in Antioch. Again, there

was plenty of work that needed to be done...and nobody was throwing rocks at them! But, Paul didn't see the church at Antioch as a parking lot. To him it was a launching pad! It seems that Paul could never settle down to a comfortable ministry anywhere as long as there were doors opened to him for the preaching of the gospel. Paul cared about the lost who had never heard the gospel, both Jews and Gentiles, and he was itching to do something about it. "Hey Barney; let's go visit all the churches we started in Galatia." He knew God was still at work so he should be too.

Paul did quite a bit of pioneer evangelism, preaching in areas where there was no previous gospel witness. That seems to be one of his ministry goals. But, he also understood the importance of strengthening and encouraging those who were already Christians. That was the initial motivation for this second missionary excursion. The first missionary journey had carried them into previously unreached areas and was by all accounts a great success. This next trip will prove to be even greater. Paul and his team will carry the gospel to several of the major cities of the ancient world such as Philippi, Athens, Corinth and Ephesus. Oddly enough, this soon-to-be successful second missionary journey begins with a sharp disagreement between 2 old friends and ministry partners

37-41 – It seems that the 2 missionaries readily agreed on the importance of the trip but they couldn't agree on the composition of the ministry team. If you recall, Mark had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey but had left under seemingly less than honorable circumstances. His bailing on them left Paul with a low opinion of Mark and was unwilling to trust him on any future ministry endeavors.

It's no surprise that Barnabas was so eager to bring Mark along. After all, he was his cousin and the family ties would be strong. More than that, Barnabas was the kind of guy who was eager to try to help others, that's why the early church called him the "son of encouragement." Barnabas was ready to give Mark another opportunity to serve the Lord and to prove himself a faithful servant. That's why he was so determined to bring Mark along and why he kept on insisting that he be allowed to join their ministry team.

Paul didn't quite see it that way. In fact, he was just as adamant that they not take Mark along with them! This was the guy who had deserted them

and to Paul, this was evidence of a weakness in character. Everyone has flaws in their character but Paul knew that the crucible of ministry is not the place to discover those weaknesses. The ministry was too important and the work too demanding to enlist someone who might prove unreliable again. This is what happens when an immovable object meets an unstoppable force: both are determined – in opposite opinions!

As the discussion continued, it turned into a real argument and it seemed like the only viable solution was for these 2 friends to split up the territory and separate. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus and Paul took Silas and went north. Here are 2 dedicated men of God who had just helped bring theological unity to the church and yet, they could not settle their own disagreement. Sadly enough, this situation wasn't an **aberration**. It may seem unique in the book of Acts but it was and continues to be a far too common occurrence in the Body of Christ. As disturbing, painful and counter-productive as these conflicts are, God is still able to overrule them and accomplish His purposes.

Who was right and who was wrong in this instance? The Bible doesn't specify and Luke doesn't give us a clue. It's never good when personal disputes flare up between those serving in the ministry. After the theological battle they had just come through, this controversy seems a lot less important and a lot more personal. It's quite possible that the relationship between Paul and Barnabas had been strained when Barnabas had originally sided with the certain men from Judea in Antioch (**Gal 2:11-14**). In the end, it doesn't really matter who was right. Good, godly people can disagree but it's always better if they can do it without being disagreeable.

It could be that both men were right on some things and wrong on others. Paul looked at Mark and asked, "What can he do for God's work?" Barnabas looked at Mark and asked, "What can God's work do for him?" Both questions are important and applicable to the Lord's work but it is often difficult to keep things balanced. John Mark did eventually prove himself to be a faithful servant of the Lord and Paul came to love and appreciate him. But for now, the die is cast and the split is permanent. It's hard to know if the personal relationship of Paul and Barnabas was strained for an extended period of time. Barnabas takes Mark and goes to Cyprus and that's the last we hear of him.

On one hand, there are now 2 missionary teams instead of just 1. God changes His workmen but His work continues on unabated. On the other hand, even though God overruled this falling-out, this can never be casually used as an excuse for carnal behavior. God can (and does) redeem good out of evil but we are still accountable for the evil we do even if God is bringing good out of it. It's possible that the Holy Spirit has intended all along to separate the 2 friends to expand the ministry but He surely didn't intend for them to separate in that way. Yes, God has already factored our stubbornness and rebellion into His plan for our lives but we're still responsible for our actions because they only detract from the plan. God's providence should never be used as an excuse for Christian quarrelling.

Still, if God had to depend on perfect people to accomplish His work, He'd never get anything done! Our limitations and imperfections are good reasons to stay heavily dependant on God's grace. Our sufficiency...is from Him alone!

16:1-5 – Silas wasn't the only new recruit on the team. When Paul and Silas arrived in Lystra, they discovered a young disciple named Timothy and invited him to go along. This is the first mention of Timothy in the NT but it is certainly not the last. It seems that Timothy came to Christ through Paul's ministry when he visited Lystra on the first missionary journey. Here, he is just a young recruit, a green-horn with little to no experience under his belt. But, after spending a great amount of time with Paul, watching him minister, hearing him teach, seeing him contend for the faith, Timothy matured into a strong servant of God in his own right.

Of course, hanging around Paul had to be a bit intimidating. Paul had a brilliant mind, a forceful personality and was always ready to speak. But, Timothy was mainly a pastor at heart, as opposed to Paul, who's chiefly an evangelist. This wasn't a point of contention – it was a perfect blending of spiritual gifts. Timothy was gifted to minister to those Paul reached with his preaching. During his apprenticeship with Paul, he acquired wisdom for building up churches, handling disputes and counseling with those in the churches who had difficulties.

Now, it's easy to assume that Paul, being such a strong character, may have looked down on Timothy but the truth is – Paul did the exact opposite (**Phil 2:19-24**). Paul says a number of interesting things about Timothy here.

He says Timothy was unique among his co-laborers in that he thought like Paul (was like-minded). Sure, he didn't have the same personality, gifts or work assignment as Paul but he had the same heart and vision for the missionary efforts and building up the churches as Paul did. Timothy was concerned for other people, he looked out for the interests of Jesus (right spiritual priorities) and he worked well with other people. Timothy was a good pastor; that's why Paul was so comfortable with giving him the responsibility to shepherd many of the churches he had started.

Now, vs3 seems to contradict everything that Paul argued against in ch15. There, he was adamant that circumcision must never be upheld as a condition for salvation. Now, he makes Timothy be circumcised! Why the discrepancy? Paul's actions appear to contradict the decision of the Jerusalem council but they don't. The decision in ch15 was that circumcision wasn't necessary in order to be saved. In fact, Paul refused to have Titus circumcised at that time so as to not give the allusion of support to that false doctrine. The battle in Jerusalem was about the truth of the gospel not the fitness of a man to serve. Paul's concern for Timothy wasn't his salvation but his fitness for service.

By Jewish law, Timothy was a Jew because his mother was Jewish. But, since he was uncircumcised, he was technically an apostate Jew. If Paul had any hope of being welcomed into any of the synagogues in the area, he could not be seen as supporting apostasy. Paul didn't want Timothy's status as an un-circumcised Jew to hinder their work among the Jews and synagogues in the region. As Paul saw it, being a good Christian didn't mean being a bad Jew. Timothy would be working with both Jews and Gentiles and it was imperative that he not offend either. Paul had him circumcised to avoid him being a stumbling block to them bringing the message of the gospel. If vs4-5 are any evidence, Paul's decision paid off as the churches in that area were strengthened and continued to grow.

6-10 – Paul now had a new missionary team with new workers, it only seems right that he should also receive a new vision for his service. We like to think that the giants of faith in the NT had it all together all the time but that is not the case. It's kind of comforting in a way to see that they had the same struggles that we still have today. It's comforting because we see that the Lord gets them through their struggles and He will get us through ours as well, if we seek His face and obey His voice. Paul received the guidance

he needed; just probably not in the way he had wanted it.

After leaving Antioch, Paul and his team traveled north through Syria and then they turned west through Cilicia. Eventually, they arrived in the cities of Derbe and Lystra in the southern part of Galatia. Continuing in the westerly direction would have brought them to the Roman province of Asia but the Holy Spirit stopped them from going there. So, in light of this closed door, Paul tried to go north into the region of Bithynia but the Spirit prevented him from doing that too. So, they couldn't go west and they couldn't go north. The only thing they could do was thread the needle between these 2 regions and make their way to Troas on the coast of the Aegean Sea and wait for clear direction from the Lord.

This is a good example of negative direction. A lot of the guidance we get is like this – closed doors. We head off in a promising direction only to find the way blocked. We head off into another direction and find the same barriers. We pray and get depressed when God doesn't respond quickly enough to our liking. We think He doesn't care. What we need to understand is that while negative guidance is not the preferred way to discover God's will, it is still guidance. If we learn anything from Paul here it's that negative guidance prevents us from going to where we are not called so that, in God's timing, we can go to the place where God is calling us to, the place where He can bless us.

The positive leading came at last, a vision from God. This call of God to Paul and his missionary team teaches some important lessons about missions. Why do we engage in world missions? There are a number of reasons.

1. Jesus told us to do it. The Great Commission is recorded 5 times in the NT. Clearly, this isn't something we can overlook. It's a need that deserves our undivided and sustained attention and obedience.

2. Christ's love constrains us. It's important for us to carry the gospel to the world if for no other reason than Jesus told us to. But it would be sad if the only motivation we had was just obedience. Paul understood both the marching orders of Jesus as well as the compulsion of Christ's love, saying, "Christ's love compels me." Christ's love involves the love of Christ for the lost; He loves them. But it also involves our love, as the love of Christ works

its way out through those who know Him. Paul loved those he was sent to. So must we.

3. The world is in need. The world is perishing in its sin apart from the gospel. The call to come to Macedonia wasn't focused on obedience or love – it was because there was a great need: "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Meaning, we need help and you're the ones who can help us.

These 3 truths should motivate us to carry the gospel message wherever we go. We tend to focus on the first 2 because they are true and compelling but the 3rd motivation is just as much. We often excuse our lack of witness by acknowledging that many people in our day aren't interested in the gospel, which is true. Many people are self-satisfied, got it made in the shade. But, there are still plenty of people out there who have real, pressing needs – physical, emotional, financial, etc. It's the pressure from these needs that makes them open to the gospel message. Are we sensitive to the needs of others? Do we look for an open door to sharing the gospel as well as assistance?

Paul didn't despair, he didn't get angry, he didn't contemplate packing it in and going home. He kept moving in "a" direction until he received clear direction from the Lord. And, boy; was it clear! After Paul received the vision he must have shared it with the rest of the team, the result being that they all immediately got ready and crossed over the sea to Macedonia. This was the official opening of Europe to Christianity, and with it the gospel began the long westward march that eventually brought it to us.

It might be interesting to speculate how much different world history would have turned out had Paul been allowed to pursue his first or even second plans! The history of the church in Europe is, shall we say, less than stellar. Who are we kidding – it was atrocious! But, even in the midst of the apostasy and degradation of the church during the Middle Ages in Europe, God still preserved His Word and a portion of those who remained faithful, or became faithful to His Word. The legacy left behind by Paul's efforts on this missionary journey echoes down through the centuries into the present day. We are the modern recipients of his faithful obedience, his compelling love and desire to help. Can we do any less? The Commission is still in place, the love of Christ is ours, the world is still in desperate need of help and the ball is in our court. What we do with our responsibility to the gospel

will have repercussions in the future.

God is still in the business of calling out a people to Himself, a people who are willing to know Him. His plan for us is to simply assist Him in this great call and work. Paul was an extraordinary man – there will never be another like him. But, just like him, we are called to live for Jesus and bear a faithful witness of Him every day. 😊