

STRENGTHENED

Acts 15:36-16:5

Several years ago our church had an emphasis that was focused on increasing the number of baptisms. Twenty-six people were baptized one Sunday morning. Forty percent of those are no longer active. In fact, 30 percent all those baptized in that year are in the inactive category just four years later. Thomas Rainer stated that in Southern Baptist Churches that “six million of the sixteen million members cannot be located.” The number of members who are inactive is very likely to be considerably higher. Evangelism without discipleship misses the point of the Great Commission.

Follow-up, encouragement, correction, and redirection are critically important to anything that is fairly new in its developing stages. In fact, it can legitimately be argued that all these factors are needed regardless of the stage of development in anything we do. Pianist, composer, and former prime minister of Poland, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, is quoted as saying “If I miss one day of practice, I notice it. If I miss two days, the critics notice it. If I miss three days, the audience notices it.” Another way to look at this same idea is that having a successful vegetable garden involves more than just planting a few seeds. It also involves watering, cultivating, fertilizing, pest control, and harvesting properly. In the same way, Paul recognized that the churches that he and Barnabas had helped start on their first missionary trip needed to have some attention to help strengthen them and help them develop and bear fruit.

Parting Ways – 15:36-39

³⁶ After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.” ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. ³⁸ But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. Acts 15:36–39 (NASB95)

After the conference in Jerusalem where the concern regarding whether a Gentile person needed to become a “practicing Jew” was addressed, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch. We recall that the answer to that question had already been answered by God in the situation that had happened a decade earlier in the family of Cornelius and on multiple occasions in cities and towns that Barnabas and Paul had visited in the past year. The conclusion from Peter was that Jews need to be saved in the same way that Gentiles were saved – by grace, through faith. Observing Jewish traditions and practices did not cause a person to be “more saved” than anyone else. What Jesus did on the Cross and in the Resurrection were both necessary and sufficient for our salvation.

Paul had already seen how false teaching could infiltrate a church in the case of a fairly strong congregation in Antioch. False ideas were prevalent even in the Jerusalem church. This knowledge of the vulnerability of a church to being deceived made the need to revisit them to see how they were doing all the more important.

Barnabas was agreeable to going; however, he wanted to take John Mark on the trip as they had originally started on the first missionary trip. Barnabas had a personal interest in Mark since he was his cousin and the disposition of Barnabas of being a natural encourager was such that he wanted to develop the potential that he saw in Mark. Paul, on the other hand, was more task oriented and strongly believed that the nature of the work that needed to be done would require more reliability than Mark had shown previously. We could argue that both of them were right and both were overly rigid in their positions.

The “sharp disagreement” resulted in a division of the original team. Did this separation hurt the Kingdom of God or help it? To the extent that the contention produced ill feelings between Paul and Barnabas, we would say that it was not a good outcome. I suspect that such feelings were temporary and sometimes we have to endure a seemingly bad situation for the greater good. Looking ahead to what happened in the coming decades, Barnabas’ work with Mark turned out very well and Mark was accepted by Paul and was, in fact, very useful to him in his later years of ministry. Also, without the encouragement and coaching that Barnabas provided, we might not have the Gospel of Mark. God has a way of turning bad situations into good outcomes and we also see in our 20-20 hindsight that if Mark and Barnabas had gone with Paul that Silas would not have had an opportunity to make a contribution to strengthening existing churches and establishing new ones. My guess is that if Mark had been with Paul when he returned to the Derbe/Lystra area that Timothy would not have been added to the mission team. The lesson for us is that when we can’t agree with each other on things that are not critical doctrinal issues, then we can trust the Lord to bring order out of the chaos and unity out of the different approaches. If we can keep in mind that God really is in control, then we don’t need to be contentious about our differences as we contend for the faith.

Luke recorded that Barnabas and Mark went to Cypress which was the first place that Barnabas and Paul had gone on their first missionary endeavor and it was also the home of Barnabas. We don’t hear anything further about ministry efforts of Barnabas; however, Mark is mentioned later on in the letters of Paul.

New Team – 15:40-16:3

⁴⁰ But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. ¹ Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, ² and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. ³ Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. Acts 15:40–16:3 (NASB95)

Paul and Silas visited several places: Syria, Cilicia, Derbe, Lystra. Since there were no specific things mentioned with regard to the situations in the various churches, we might be able to conclude that things were going well.

It was in Lystra that they added Timothy to their team. It has been assumed that Timothy’s mother and grandmother were converts to Christianity as a result of the work that God had been doing through the church that had been established in Lystra during the first visit by Paul and Barnabas. We know from the letter that Paul had written to Timothy several years later that Lois and Eunice had been influential in Timothy’s salvation and his involvement in the church there. Timothy was well respected by those who knew him and apparently they had told Paul and Silas about him.

Timothy’s mother was Jewish and his father was Greek. There are several commentary references that assert that during that time a person’s ethnicity was determined by that of the mother rather than the father. Since that was the case, then Timothy would have been considered to be a Jew in that culture.

Let’s now consider another young man (named Titus) who was associated with the church at Antioch. According to Paul’s account (in the Galatian letter) of his visit to Jerusalem, Titus (a Gentile) was one of the people who traveled with Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem. We recall that the issue under consideration by the Jerusalem church leaders was whether a Gentile needed to be circumcised and observe Jewish customs before being saved. Paul specifically

mentioned in the Galatian letter (2:3) that Titus was not required to be circumcised because he was a Gentile.

As we refocus on Timothy, we notice that Paul did just the opposite with Timothy as compared to what happen with Titus. The different approaches were based on the ethnicities of the two men. Since Titus was a Gentile, then he did not need the Jewish practices and observances for salvation. We could say the same thing about Timothy regarding “salvation.” However, since Timothy would be considered to be Jewish, then he needed to observe the Jewish rituals and observances to be accepted by other Jews that the team would encounter in their travels.

The two different approaches that Paul took accomplished two different objectives. In the case of Titus, Paul’s stance sent a message that there would be no compromise with regard to this issue of Gentiles and salvation. In the case of Timothy, the message that Paul sent was that he was NOT encouraging Jews to abandon their heritage as Hebrews when they were saved. In other words, Jews could (or should) be Jews in their traditional observances and customs and still be Christians by the grace of God through faith and Gentiles should never practice Jewish observances and customs as a reason to be qualified for salvation.

Growth Seen – 16:4-5

⁴ Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. ⁵ So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily. Acts 16:4–5 (NASB95)

In addition to bringing encouragement to the various churches in the Middle Eastern region that was fairly close to Israel, they also presented the information that James had written regarding Gentiles in the church. This information would have had a lot of interest in those cities since the Jewish population was fairly substantial in those areas. It was in these areas where the Judaizers would have had their primary influence during this time (A.D. 50) of the history of the expansion of the church.

It had to be encouraging for Paul, Silas and Timothy that the churches in those regions were growing both in their faith and in numbers. The people in those areas embraced the message of salvation by grace through faith as really good news and they were willing to share this good news with people they knew who were still involved in pagan religions or no religion at all.

It was immediately after this that Paul and Silas were directed to go into the more western regions of the Roman Empire to preach the gospel. The major impediments in these areas were more closely related to individualism and pagan thought rather than from those who wanted to hold on to Judaism. Several years later (around A.D. 57) the Judaizers did show up in places such as Corinth and Colossae and introduced their false teachings.

Growth in the faith and in numbers are indications of a healthy church. If we look at the recent historical evidence in our nation we have been seeing little or no growth and in some areas a decrease in faith and numbers associated with our churches. One of the reasons for such a decrease is that rather than holding onto the truth, many groups have tried to accommodate the ways of the world in an effort to be more acceptable to the world. The message needs to be that the church does not need to be acceptable to the world but that those who are lost need to find the way to be acceptable to the God of all creation. Delivering the message of this Good News that is also “the Way” is a substantial part of the mission of the church.

During the first century the church that was in the eastern part of the Middle East had issues that dealt with paganism, immorality, and Judaism. Those in the western part and

extending into Europe were having to deal with the general immorality of the times and individualism of western thought. In the world of today, there are competing worldwide religions, atheism, secularism, as well as individualism that are all competing for our time and attention. Unless our priorities change, we may not see the results that Paul and Silas saw regarding growth in the church today.