THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM
ACTS 15
2026-09-27

When Paul and Barnabas got to Pisidian Antioch the synagogue rulers sent word to them that if they had a message of encouragement for the people, please speak (Acts 13:15). After they had spoken, the following week almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. May God grant listening hearts among those who are yet strangers to God's grace! Keep us persistent, undeterred and not discouraged.

The other aspect here is once you're on the move for God, you're going to face opposition. Some who heard Paul and Barnabas speak were jealous and talked abusively against what they were saying. With that rejection, they turned to the Gentiles. *"When the Gentiles heard this they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed."* You have been appointed for eternal life. You cannot lose it. That said, every one of us is called to do our best and to intentionally move with God and for God. But expect opposition. In fact, maybe even enjoy it.
"Paul and Barnabas were expelled from…Pisidian Antioch. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 13:15-16)

Rejection of what you say may well be a sign that you've moved to do the Lord's will, not just agreed with it. You will always meet those oppose you/the message of the Gospel, but you will also find fertile ground. So do not despair. Move to where the soil is fertile, but understand that the tough soil, may yet be tilled fruitfully.

Paul was stoned in Lystra due to trouble-makers following he and Barnabas from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium. They dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead, but he was alive he got up… and went back into the city. They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples…We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."

Get back in the ring. Get up one more time than you're knocked down. It takes courage to be a Christian. But you are never a one-man-band; you are never alone. Jesus didn't come to make life easy; He came to make each of us great. Not only are we never alone because God is always with us: neither are we alone because we have the fellowship of the Church. The door of faith had now opened wide to the Gentiles. Praise God! We don't face the kind of persecution here that puts our lives in peril. But we can be cruelly ostracized.

That ostracizing moves us to today's message. We may miss it if we don't pay close attention, but this chapter is epic in how the Church moved forward. The Gospel was being preached to Jew and Gentile alike and they were living together as brethren. But there were certain Jews to whom this was quite unthinkable; they were, after all God's Chosen People. They

were quite willing that Gentiles should come into the Church—on the condition that they first became Jews. Had this attitude prevailed, Christianity would have become only a sect of Judaism. Some came to Antioch (they weren't from there) and tried to persuade the converts that they would lose everything unless they first accepted Judaism. Paul and Barnabas argued strongly against this and matters were deadlocked. There was only one way out. They appealed to Jerusalem, the headquarters of the Church for a ruling. Paul and Barnabas simply told the story of what had happened and let the facts speak for themselves. But some of the Pharisees who had become Christians insisted that all converts must be circumsized and keep the Law.

It might seem strange to us but what was at stake was completely fundamental. Was the gift of God for the select few or for all the world? We only realize the true meaning of Christianity when every barrier is broken down.

Peter was present at this Council of Jerusalem and reminded those present of what had happened with he and Cornelius (chapter ten) ten years before this. The proof that Peter had acted rightly was that God had granted His Holy Spirit to to the Gentiles. Though they might have been "ceremonially unclean", God had, by His Spirit cleansed their hearts. The attempt to obey the Law and so earn salvation was a losing battle. There was only one way—the one way in—the acceptance of the free gift of the grace of God. Can a person earn the favour of God, or must 1 admit their own helplessness and in humble faith accept what the grace of God gives? What this faction was saying, in effect, was, "Religion means earning God's favour by keeping the Law." Peter said, *"Religion consists of casting ourselves on the grace of God*." A religion of works versus a religion of grace. No one can ever put God in his/her debt. Our paradox is this: the way to victory is through surrender and the way to power is through admitting one's own helplessness.

It is James who answers. He was the leader of the Jerusalem church. His was not a formal, but rather a moral leadership conceded to him. This was not James the disciple. This was James the brother of Jesus who had a special resurrection appearance all to himself (1 Corinthians 15:7). There was obviously a complete change in him from the time that he didn't believe Jesus was who he said he was back in John 7:3-5. I guess a personal resurrection appearance could change one's perspective on that. It's a reminder too, that God is never finished with the unbeliever. But James as the speaker here was also important for another reason—he was a rigorous observer of the Law. So if he could come down on the side of the Gentiles, then all was well. Don't put hindrances in front of people.

So they drafted a letter and kept it positive, simple and unburden-some. First of all they disowned those who had taken it upon themselves to trouble the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. Second, they didn't just write a letter; they had two of their number accompany Barnabas and Paul as emissaries to hand deliver the letter and speak to it. I can't pass up the opportunity here to say we have never had an easier time to communicate with others with personal phones—only to mess it up with texts or leaving messages. I can't get my kids or grandkids to answer their phones. It's so much better to hear a voice or even better to see a face!

But back to the message: abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood (the blood was the life and the life belonged to God alone), from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality—chastity was a completely new virtue that Christianity brought into the world. All of these requests were easily doable. Without them, social connection between Jew and Gentile would have not existed. Within the Church the principle was established that Jew and Gentile were one. Personal visits can convey a friendly warmth that the bare reception of a letter might not.

After the letter was well received, Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. And then, we return to the realities of daily liv-ing: Paul and Barnabas who had travelled together and faced so much together had a disagreement that they couldn't resolve. Remember, back in Acts 11, Barnabas had travelled from Antioch to Tarsus just to bring him back to Antioch so the two of them could be a missionary/preaching team. Remember, even farther back in ch. 9, it was Barnabas who vouched for Paul's (then Saul) bonified conversion to the Way. And yet, it wasn't a matter of doctrine that divided them, it was a person and that person was John Mark. He had left Barnabas and Paul during their 1st mission trip in Pamphylia and returned to Jerusalem. It's not stated why he left, but Paul considered it to be a desertion and obviously felt him to be unreliable or unworthy to be on the next mission trip. Barnabas and John Mark were cousins.

We have these kinds of realities today. People—even Christians—have disagreements that are strong enough to cause them to go their separate ways. Somebody says something that the other finds hurtful or objectionable and they choose or are unable to patch it over. It obviously happens with individuals; it also happens with individuals and churches. People feel ignored, disrespected, invisible, they don't belong. That's an abbreviated list. No doubt, you can add your own lengthy file to this. The old Paul Simon recording, "There Must be fifty Ways to Leave your Lover"—just hop off the bus, Gus, just make a new plan, Sam…Think of the Church as your lover. People walk. Sometimes over very little. Sometimes over bigger stuff. Sometimes over very little that just seems very big.

The thing is, once you cross that bridge it is difficult to go back. You get committed to a new path and it's not easy to retrace it. The same James that we were just talking about gives us great advice: *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." (Ja. 1:19-20).* It is always important for people to be seen and to be heard.

Well, what came out of this? A split. That's a bad thing for sure. But the result was two missionary teams instead of one. Barnabas and Mark sailed for Cyprus, while Paul and Silas went through Syria and Cilicia, "strengthening the churches". So, again, you can see that *God works all things together for good, for those who love God and are called according to His purpose."(Romans 8:28).* I had a good friend in my pre-pastor days who, when I lamented someone leaving our church, said, "You know, so and so has not stopped being a Christian.

Where he/she goes he/she will be taking the Gospel with them and contributing to the wellbeing of others and the church they attend."

All of this said, it is important to always be as *intentionally invitational* as we can, to keep relations without issue. Of course it's natural for people to see matters differently. It would be a very mundane world if everyone agreed completely on everything. But respectfully, very respectfully walk with one another.

Now there is a happier finish to this episode. Ten or twelve years later in his last letter, Paul encourages Timothy to bring John Mark to him while he is in prison *"because he is helpful to me in my ministry," (2 Timothy 4:11).* It forces us to look at not writing someone off as a lost cause. Because a person does something you don't like or you think is wrong, doesn't mean that person is irretrievably in the sewer. People change. Particularly with Christ, they can be completely redeemed and remarkable, good relations can be reestablished. Does anyone come to mind for you in this regard? If so, it may well be time to act on that inclination.