

November 27
Acts 15-18

Couple things to notice:

First of all, it surprises us that this great work of God began with what Luke calls a "sharp controversy" between Paul and Barnabas. It centered on the person of John Mark, who began the first journey with the apostles, but for some reason has deserted them and turned back. Barnabas is all for taking John Mark again - giving him another chance - Paul is adamantly opposed to that. They cannot agree, so the dynamic partnership is dissolved. Barnabas takes John Mark and goes his way, while Paul takes Silas and embarks in a different direction. Here are two Spirit-filled believers - there can be no question of that - and yet they do not agree; there is conflict! Just being Christians does not guarantee that we will always be in agreement! When we all get to heaven, it may be different, but right now we will have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that unity in Christ does not always imply unanimity.

It was not easy to stand against the view of a personality so powerful and so obviously anointed as the apostle Paul, but Barnabas did and by giving John Mark that second-chance apprenticeship, Barnabas performed an invaluable task for the church through the ages. Mark did not fail the second time, but grew in grace and maturity. He later became a companion of Peter, and from the preaching and recollections of that great apostle, Mark wrote the Gospel that now bears his name. At the very end of Paul's life, in II Timothy, he asks for Mark to come and be with him. Thank you, Lord, for Barnabas' patience, and his willingness to give Mark a second chance. Why didn't the Spirit of God, who was so obviously resident in the lives of both Paul and Barnabas, bring them into agreement right at the outset? After the disagreement, there were two effective missionary teams, where before there had only been one. Perhaps sometimes God allows honest disagreement to exist in the body, so that new missionary units will be formed to get the job done more rapidly and effectively.

The second thing to notice chapters was that before he set out on the journey in which he took not only an associate - Silas - but some young apprentices, he had Timothy, one of those apprentices, circumcised. Why would he do that, in light of all that has been said about circumcision and freedom from the law? The reason for the decision regarding Timothy is probably to be found in the fact that he was not really a Gentile, since he had a Jewish mother, and had been raised observing the Jewish ceremonial laws. While adamantly insisting that Gentiles should not be forced to be circumcised as a pre-condition to knowing and serving God, Paul is not opposed to having Timothy undergo the ritual voluntarily for the sake of expanding his future ministry to include both Jews and Gentiles. This tells us something pretty important about Paul. He was adamant about principles, but he was also intensely practical. That means that he will do whatever it takes - short of compromising those principles - to reach people for Christ. So Paul and his companions - Silas, Timothy and possibly a few others - began their journey, and the churches in Asia Minor were strengthened in the faith and grew DAILY.

In Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and Athens, Paul went forward, aggressively evangelizing according to a well-defined strategy. Go to the principal city of the geographic region you are attempting to reach. Begin at the place in which you are likely to find the most receptive people - for Paul that was always the Jewish synagogue. Then, after preaching in the synagogue until a strong core group had been founded, or until he was literally driven out, Paul attached himself to one of the new converts with a promising web of influence, and proceeded to systematically moving through that web of influence, looking for more converts, while he was teaching and establishing those who had already placed their faith and trust in Jesus!

Paul's missionary work drew fierce opposition in every one of the cities except the city of Athens, where the plethora of religions and gods was so great that Paul actually discovered an altar dedicated to the "Unknown God."

Did you notice how different Paul's preaching to the intellectuals in Athens was from his sermons in the Jewish synagogues of Asia Minor? He looks for a point of contact with their culture and finds it in the altar to the Unknown God. *"That God,"* he declares, *"is the creator of heaven and earth,"* and he proceeds to talk first about creation and then about Christ. His main theme is Jesus and the resurrection.

Paul looked at the culture of the Athenians and found a 'key' that would enable him to reach the Athenians with the Gospel. In every culture, God has placed a key (one writer calls it the "Melchizedek factor") that will help to tie the truth of God's revelation to something in their tradition. In this way, God has prepared civilizations and peoples who have not had the benefit of special revelation for the time when someone will bring them the good news of the Savior of all mankind.

Major elements in Paul's missionary journeys:

Paul gravitated, by design, toward the principal cities of each geographic region he entered. He understood quite clearly that if you impact the major metropolitan center of a region with the Gospel, the normal flow of people in and out of that center of culture and commerce will quite naturally carry with it the good news of Jesus Christ, to all of the surrounding countryside that looks to that major city for its life.

The next step of Paul's strategy was to locate the most receptive group of people.

Paul worked webs of influences. Remember the principle the Gospel spreads most rapidly and most effectively across already existing lines of social communication - that is, through trust relationships! Take great comfort from this divinely arranged partnership between Paul and Aquila and Priscilla. Paul had come - apparently alone - to Corinth, the city the ancient world would have voted "least likely to respond" to the Gospel. He was weak; he was afraid. We don't often think of Paul like that, but that was his testimony, and God brought Aquila and his wife Priscilla to encourage Paul and to assist him in the great work of preaching God's Word. There are times when most of us are given a job to do for God that we are convinced is too big, too tough, too intimidating to ever tackle, let alone accomplish. God knew Paul felt that way, and

He sent help to be there when Paul arrived. He'll do the very same for us! God will do whatever needs to be done to encourage us and to establish us in His work.