

A Surprising Recipe for Gospel Growth: Conflict and Circumcision

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[0 : 00] So let's turn to our Bible reading here now, and we're in Acts chapter 15, reading from verse 36 through to chapter 16, verse 5.

And you'll find that in your church Bible on 925, page 925, 924. Just a word of reminder from last week.

Last week we saw the apostles meet together in Jerusalem to face a problem. The gospel was going out to Gentiles, and many of them were believing. And the big question arose, do these new Gentiles have to adopt Jewish practices to be properly Christian?

And the apostles all agreed together, came to a conclusion that no, they do not. Their advice was just to keep them away from pagan practices, that they might not slip back into pagan idolatry. And one of the things, therefore, they didn't have to take on was circumcision. So it might be worthwhile keeping that in mind as we read through these verses, because you might find a slight surprise. So let's read together from Acts 15, verse 36.

[1 : 16] And after some days, Paul said to Barnabas, Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaim the word of the Lord, and see how they are.

Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John, called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.

But Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer.

[2 : 16] But his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him.

And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places. For they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.

So the churches were strengthened in the faith and they increased in numbers daily. This is the word of the Lord.

Well, good evening, everyone. Welcome to our service tonight. Well, please do turn up the passage that Andy has read for us. Acts chapter 15 and page 924 in the Vista Bibles there.

Acts chapter 15. Now, this is a short section, just two paragraphs.

[3 : 29] But it raises a lot of questions, doesn't it? At first glance, it seems to record what seem at first glance a catalogue of errors.

Embarrassing conflict and confusing circumcision. We're perhaps left wondering what on earth is going on here. Has Luke, the writer, made a mistake by including these sections?

Well, we need to remember that this book, this account of the continuing acts of the ascended Lord Jesus, it's not some sort of airbrushed history.

It's a book that records reality. And it does so in a very carefully ordered way. Luke doesn't hide away the rather embarrassing falling out that we read about here between Paul and Barnabas.

Luke includes it. Which actually ought to give us even greater confidence in the reliability of the whole account. This really is an account of what really happened.

[4 : 35] If Luke was wanting to put on a polished appearance to the early church, he probably wouldn't include this falling out, would he? But he does include it. Because this account is an account based on what actually happened.

It's reality. But these two paragraphs, despite the questions they raise, despite the difficulties they record, these two paragraphs record for us the output, the outcome of Paul's decisions.

The decision to part from Barnabas and the decision to circumcise Timothy. It records for us the outcome. Look at chapter 15, verse 41.

What do we see happening there? He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. And again, chapter 16, verse 5. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and they increased in numbers daily.

So the results in both cases is strengthened churches. And that is what Luke is wanting us to see here. It's what he's showing us. A growing, strengthening church.

[5 : 47] He is showing us what at first glance seems a very surprising recipe for gospel growth, conflict, and circumcision.

So let's look at these two paragraphs in turn and seek to learn what Luke is teaching us about strengthening the church, about enabling gospel mission. First then, the end of chapter 15, what at first glance seems to be a falling out between Paul and Barnabas.

So this is our first of two C's, conflict. And we see here that difficult decisions, we see the difficult decisions in the realm of discernment are sometimes required if the church is to be strengthened. Now it's vital to note that this is not a falling out over the essence of the gospel. This isn't about doctrine.

But rather it's about discernment. Paul and Barnabas, they're not in disagreement about the essentials of the faith here. Nor are they in disagreement about their overriding big aim, their big purpose.

[7 : 02] Paul and Barnabas are not in disagreement about the essentials of the faith. Look at verse 36. Paul says to Barnabas, Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaim the word of the Lord and see how they are.

Now Barnabas seems absolutely on board with that, doesn't he? And he suggests that they bring along with them John called Mark. And this is where the disagreement rears its head.

It is Paul's view, it's his conviction, that John Mark is not a suitable team member for this particular mission journey. Now note, Paul makes no comment at all on his status as a Christian.

But look at what Luke does record for us, what insight he gives us about Paul's view on this. Look at verse 38. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone on with them to the work.

That's all we're told. That's the reason. Now on a previous mission trip, you can read about this in chapter 13, verse 13. On a previous trip, John Mark had only come so far before he turned back to Jerusalem.

[8 : 24] Now we're not told why John Mark did that. We're not told why Paul feels that this was significant. Perhaps it was to do with John Mark's stamina.

Maybe it just wasn't up for the journey. Perhaps Paul felt that his turning back revealed something of his willingness to endure hardship. Perhaps there was some sort of lack of commitment.

Perhaps they just didn't click as people. There wasn't good chemistry. And that's necessary for a long and dangerous mission trip that they're about to take part on. But for whatever reason, Paul thought it best not to take him with them.

Now this is not about doctrine. But it is about discernment for Paul. And it's here that the sharp disagreement arises. Barnabas takes a different view.

He thinks he should come. Now what we know about Barnabas, he's quite a generous, heartish sort of chap, isn't he? And he perhaps feels that Mark could do with a second chance. Let's bring him along.

[9 : 27] Let's see how he goes this time. Perhaps it was because they were related. They were cousins. Now Paul and Barnabas, they have very different views on John Mark and his participation in this mission journey.

And that's okay. I think that's what Luke is wanting to see here. It's not quite as straightforward as saying, well, Paul was wrong or Barnabas was wrong or that they were both wrong.

Paul had to come to a landing, didn't he? He had to decide whether John Mark was a suitable member of the team or not. And he decides that he wasn't.

A decision had to be made. Now remember that Paul was living in the real world. He had character flaws, as did John Mark, as did Barnabas.

And Paul, summoning all his wisdom, summoning all he knew about himself and about John Mark and about what lay ahead, his judgment was that John Mark couldn't go with them.

[10 : 34] Luke is telling us that this was a necessary decision. And it seems it was a good decision. It was a necessary separation. Look at how the broader church responds to Paul's decision.

Verse 40. Paul goes, doesn't he, with the blessing of the church, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. So clearly the broader church sees no major problem here. And so they separate. Barnabas and John Mark, they head the sea route and they go to Cyprus. Paul and Silas, they go inland and they go through Syria and Cilicia towards Derby.

And the result, verse 41, strengthening the churches. So do we see what Luke is showing us here? This wasn't a gospel issue.

They were not separating on some facts of fundamental doctrine. They remained at one on that, didn't they? They remained at one on the gospel. And they remained at one on the core task they would have been getting on with, which was bringing the gospel to the Gentile world and strengthening those young churches.

[11 : 47] But they had differing views on the exact details of how to conduct that work. And particularly it was here to do with personnel. And that's okay.

In the real world, in real churches, we do have to come to decisions like this. Sometimes they're difficult. Sometimes there does have to be a separate going of the ways.

Sometimes good and godly people have the very same goal. People are absolutely clear on the gospel and about proclaiming the gospel.

They may come to a very different view about the precise details of how to go about that, like Paul and Barnabas did here. Personalities clash. Plans clash.

And that's okay. In fact, it's best sometimes for the progress of the gospel if people do go their separate ways. So I think Luke is teaching us here that we need to be realistic about that.

[12 : 48] Whilst we must be clear on the gospel itself, we must be united on that. United on the big goal, namely sharing the gospel with as many other people as possible. We don't necessarily have to be united on the precise way of going about that.

Given all our particular backgrounds, our personalities, our abilities, our skills, our judgments, we may arrive at different conclusions about how best to do things.

Different conclusions about who we can work with and how. That, Luke is showing us, is how it is in the real world. So don't panic.

Don't panic when you see disagreements like this happening in the church. Don't get overly distracted about this sort of thing. If it's something to do with the very essence of the gospel, then yes, that's time to take action and make a fuss.

But not with matters like this one, where Paul and Barnabas disagree about the thing they disagree about here. They go their separate ways, and the result is gospel growth.

[13 : 56] You see, both of them, they go about what they plan to do anyway. They're revisiting the churches they first went to. Barnabas goes to Cyprus, and Paul goes to the other churches.

And instead of there being one mission team, now we have two. It's a doubling of effort. It's a separating of the ways, but it's okay. So that's the first thing we need to see here with this conflict. We see here that difficult decisions, when it comes to the area of discernment, are sometimes required if the church is to be strengthened. Sometimes conflict like this, it is okay.

So don't panic. Don't panic when you see people going separate ways and have different ideas about the particulars. I think Luke wants us to know that's okay. Let's look on then to our second point, our second C.

We've seen conflict, and then secondly, we see circumcision. So this is chapter 16, verses 1 to 5. And we see here that gaining a hearing for the gospel must be our priority.

[15 : 08] Gaining a hearing for the gospel must be our priority. So the focus is now really on Paul. We don't really hear much more about Barnabas. He goes off, and we may bump into him later. But really now the focus is very much on Paul and his ongoing work.

And Paul, as he goes to these different churches, he holds in his hand that letter that Andy was mentioning earlier, that decision from the Jerusalem Council.

And it's a letter that contains the decision about the council about that matter of circumcision. Is it or is it not necessary for salvation?

That was the question. And the decision of the council, as we saw last week, was an emphatic no. Circumcision is not a requirement for salvation.

Salvation is by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That's it. Nothing else required. So why then?

[16:12] Why does Paul circumcise Timothy? Has he forgotten the contents of the letter he holds? Is he just ignoring it?

Is he going his own way, saying, I don't care what they say in the council. I'm doing my own thing. Well, before we panic and think Paul and Luke are utterly confused and inconsistent, let's notice what the text actually says.

So we're told that Timothy was a disciple, that he was the son of a Jewish woman who is now a believer.

His father was a Greek. And presumably, we're not told, but presumably he wasn't a believer. And probably by this point, his father was dead. We're told that Timothy had a good reputation.

And Paul was keen to take him under his wing and to sign him up to the Apostle Paul's ministry training scheme. I'm sure it was a very attractive package he was offering.

[17:15] I can't pay you. We'll be walking a lot. We'll certainly face opposition and you may get stoned. But Timothy's up for it, isn't he? And we perhaps don't expect, verse 3, do we?

Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him. You can almost imagine poor Timothy there, can't you?

He's listening to Paul reading out the letter from the Jerusalem Council. Relief washes over him. Phew! I'd have to be circumcised. Paul?

Paul, why are you sharpening your knife? What's going on here? Is Paul being wildly inconsistent? What's all this about?

Why does he circumcise Timothy? Well, no, he's not at all. He's not being inconsistent. Look at the reason that is given for Timothy being circumcised.

[18:15] Look at the end of verse 3. Paul took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places. For they all knew that his father was a Greek.

You see, it wasn't that Paul circumcised him so that he'd become a real Christian. He wasn't doing it in order to make him a real Christian. He's not making the mistake that the Jerusalem Council so clearly condemned.

But he is circumcising Timothy in order to gain a hearing for the gospel. This is all about interacting with non-Christians. You see, Timothy was by birth a Jew.

His mother was a Jew. But because his father was a Greek, he was never circumcised. And it seems this was widely known about him.

People knew this. And that presents a problem for Paul. Remember Paul's strategy. Wherever he goes on his missionary journeys, his first point of call, wherever he goes, is always the synagogue.

[19:22] If there is a synagogue, he goes there. Every time. And there he starts to proclaim Christ. But the thing is, if Timothy goes with him as the son of a Jewish woman and yet uncircumcised, well, he wouldn't have got a hearing.

He wouldn't have been let into the synagogue. And so, because of the Jews, because of those who are yet to hear and respond to the gospel, Paul circumcises him.

He does it so that these Jews that they're going to see, they will give him a hearing. Paul's reason, it is a gospel reason, but it's nothing at all to do with Timothy's spiritual standing before God.

It's not about that, but it is about his standing before unconverted Jews. If Timothy could get access to the synagogue and to the Jews and have an opportunity to share the gospel with them, well, then Paul would do whatever it took.

If that meant circumcision, fine. If that gets him in the door of the synagogue, great, let's do it. Let's get a hearing for the gospel. In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul talks about this very thing.

[20:37] This is what he says. To the Jews, I became a Jew in order to win the Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law that I might win those under the law.

To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law that I might win those outside the law. To the weak, I became weak that I might win the weak.

I become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel that I may share with them in its blessings.

So for Paul, the issue is not, I must ensure Timothy is a real Christian and therefore must circumcise him.

That's not it. Paul is not confused as to the letter he holds in his hand. That letter that he goes about in verse 4 proclaiming. He's not confused about that. He knows that circumcision is not necessary for salvation.

[21 : 38] But the issue is rather this. I must ensure that the gospel is heard. And I need to circumcise Timothy so that a major barrier to the Jews hearing the gospel is removed.

That was why he did it. And to emphasize Paul's clarity on the issue of circumcision, consider the incident with Titus. You can read about it in Galatians.

And there, Paul was under great pressure from Jewish people to circumcise Titus to make him a real believer. Titus was a Gentile by background. But Paul refused to do that because he knew that circumcision was not essential for salvation.

He refused to do it so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved. See, Paul is clear. Not for one moment was he circumcising Timothy because he felt he was lacking as a believer.

It wasn't about that. But it was about getting a hearing for the gospel. It wasn't about trying to please certain groups in the professing church.

[22 : 48] Rather, it was about reaching out to those non-Christian Jews. Luke is really clear on this. And he wants us, likewise, to be clear. We must be clear on the gospel.

We can't be flexible when it comes to that. We saw that last week. We can't be flexible when it comes to the gospel itself. But when it comes to other matters, we perhaps need to be prepared to be very flexible indeed.

If it means that more people might hear the gospel, then we should consider it. So whether it's the particular course we use to introduce people to Christianity, or whether it's the particular locations we use, whether it's the timings of events, whatever it might be that provides opportunities for non-Christians to hear the gospel, and which is in itself not something that compromises the gospel, we should be open to it, flexible.

If that removes one more barrier for somebody hearing the gospel, then why not? If it means more people hearing, then shouldn't we consider it?

So, for example, I might go to another church, another place, to preach for them. And for them, wearing a full suit is an absolute must for the preacher.

[24 : 10] It might not be my personal preference, but I'm happy to do it, because I'm willing to be flexible in order to gain a hearing. But on the other end of the spectrum, I might go and speak at a Christian union.

And I probably want to be flexible in the other direction. So wearing a full suit there to the Christian union, well, that's probably going to put a barrier up to people listening. They think, who's this stuffy old guy? What's he doing wearing a suit to a CE meeting?

It'll just be a distraction, won't it? So flexible on the non-essentials in order to gain a hearing for the gospel. That's the key thing here.

That's the underlying principle behind Paul's actions. And the result of Paul's willingness to be flexible on the non-essentials, whilst remaining absolutely solid on the essentials, what's the outcome?

Well, verse 5, strengthening of the churches and great growth. See, these two incidents in our passage today, they are significant in terms of gospel growth, aren't they?

[25 : 16] These aren't sort of trivial matters. In both cases, the outcome is strengthening churches, growing of the gospel. Yes, as we saw last week, the church then and today must be crystal clear on the essentials of the gospel.

Crystal clear and totally inflexible in terms of what is necessary for salvation. That's an absolute non-negotiable if the church is to grow. But as well as that, we do need to undertake our gospel witnessing in the real world.

We need to proclaim that unchanging gospel. We need to do that in the real world. We do need to be realistic about conflict. Sometimes people will, for good reasons, come to quite different

conclusions about the precise details of how we're going to get on with our task. Don't panic about that sort of thing. Don't let that be a reason to fall out. If somebody thinks this particular way of organizing a church is the right way, well, that's fine. There are other ways to do it. Don't panic about that. If it means that more people can be organized to reach the gospel, then great, let's do it. Don't let that be a reason for falling out. [26 : 33] We're aiming for the same thing, aren't we? Getting the gospel out there, getting people to hear the gospel. So let's get on with that. Let's pray for one another. Even if we disagree on certain things, let's get on with the main task.

And the result here, as we've seen, was two mission teams instead of one. And it led to great gospel growth. So we need to be realistic about conflict. But also, in addition to that, we also need to be flexible on the non-essentials. We have to do all we can in order to gain a hearing for the gospel. And the result here, in chapter 16, and also for us, God willing, is great gospel growth. And what a great aim that is.

To work hard to proclaim the unchanging gospel. And to do so in the very best way that we can, with all the gifts, all the personalities that we have at our disposal. [27 : 36] And to be willing to do all that we can, whatever we can, so that as many as possible can hear for themselves the life-changing message of forgiveness of sin and everlasting life.

That is the great goal. So let's be realistic as we strive towards that end. Let's be realistic about the world we live in. Realistic about conflict. But also realistic about things that we can be flexible on. For the sake of proclaiming the gospel. Well, let's pray, shall we, before we meet around the table for communion. Let's pray. Let's pray. Our Father God, we do thank you, once again, for the great clarity of your words.

And would you help us, all of us, to be absolutely united on the essentials of the gospel. Absolutely at one on what is necessary for salvation. [28 : 43] Help us to be one on our great task of proclaiming Christ. And the great hope of the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life.

Help us to be at one on that. But also help us to be realistic about the different approaches people may have. And about the things that we can be flexible on. Help us to think about these things clearly. So that your gospel can continue to go out to the ends of the earth. So that we may have the great joy of seeing many people coming to a living faith. So help us, each of us. As together we stride side by side for the sake of the gospel. And to bring great glory to your name. Help us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.