

THE EXPLOSIVE CHURCH

(8) Tension and Turmoil.

Acts 15:1-35 is a pivotal chapter – among many pivotal chapters! – in the chronicles of the early Church. To understand where these “narrow-minded” people were coming from, we need to consider the history of the nation of Israel. In Genesis 17:11 God had given to Abraham, founder of the race, a sign which was to be imperative for inclusion among God’s chosen people. That sign was circumcision, *“and it will be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.”* Abraham fully realised its significance as he himself underwent the process that very day, together with every man in his household. Moreover, God had instructed in verse 12, “For the generations to come every male among you who is 8 days old must be circumcisedMy covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant.” In spite of all the lapses in obedience of which Israel was subsequently guilty, the rite of circumcision was strictly adhered to throughout the centuries.

We have already seen that the thousands of Jewish believers who gladly accepted the salvation given through their faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, still took it for granted that this new Christianity was just a natural development of Judaism and therefore had no right to an independent life of its own, but must have as its basis all the trappings of the parent religion. It was the godly Jews who naturally responded to the gospel message, and they were the very ones who had been fervent in keeping the Judaic laws. It is hard for us to realise today just what a giant leap it was for them to throw overboard the security of the rules and regulations ingrained in them since birth and embrace this world-changing new system of belief and action.

Hence we should not demonize the men who came from Jerusalem to the mainly Gentile church in Syrian Antioch, or accuse them of trying to split the Church in two. They were simply zealous that all believers should be completely saved through adhering to all the rules. It had just not dawned on them yet that salvation was by *faith alone in Jesus! Through that they had already been completely saved!* We might be tempted to skip this chapter as lacking any exciting action, but Luke was surely inspired to put it there for a purpose. People often make the excuse today of blaming “the church” for being imperfect, critical, divided, not what it used to be, etc. This passage shows us that the Church, from its very beginning, has always endured inward strife! It is a fact of life, and will be until we find a perfect church member.

You can possibly recall many such excuses for people who don’t want to attend church. Have you been able to give any convincing answers? Does argument ever bring people to faith in Jesus?

So, what was the solution?

Verse 2 gives the natural reaction, with Paul and Barnabas, fresh from reaping the harvest of so many Gentile believers, in “sharp dispute and debate with them.” What was the right course of action? It would have been so easy for those 2 enlightened leaders to discount any argument and lead the growing church at Antioch in their own perceived direction, splitting off from the mother church in Jerusalem. Fortunately for the Kingdom of God, they did not do that. Paul, who had long before submitted himself to be accountable to that mother church, now accepted the fact that he would have to engage in a difficult dialogue, and he, Barnabas and some other believers, set off for Jerusalem with the blessing of the Antioch believers.

The outcome of that confrontation was surely made possible only by the wonderful grace of God. When the delegation from Antioch reached Jerusalem they were “welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.” (**Verse 4**) I guess we are not surprised that the protagonists for circumcision belonged to the party of the Pharisees, to whom the keeping of the law down to the last “jot and tittle” was of paramount importance. (**Verse 5**) It is worth noting, however, that there were many Pharisees who had come to faith in Jesus, considering the trouble many of them gave to Jesus during His ministry! But it was particularly hard for them to forsake their high standards of law-keeping, and what to us may seem ridiculous fanaticism was to them a spirituality of which they felt inordinantly proud. Indeed, it was a miracle of grace that Paul – a Pharisee himself - who listed in Philippians 3:4-6 his accepted reasons for pride, could humble himself enough to say in the following verses that he considered everything a loss, in order to gain Christ and be found in Him, not having his own righteousness but that which is through the faith in Christ. Of course, Paul was a Hellenistic (Greek-influenced) Jew and a Roman citizen, and both factors would have guided him to a more balanced view of the situation.

The Jerusalem church may have felt a heavy responsibility to maintain the purity of the gospel as it began its spread to the rest of the world, but they did not deal autocratically with their flock. **Verses 6-11** tell us there was quite a lengthy discussion on the subject, before Peter brought some points into focus by recounting what had happened to Cornelius and his household. The gift of speaking in tongues was given to these uncircumcised believers as a mark of the indwelling Holy Spirit and Peter felt he had no right to question the work of the Holy Spirit! He acknowledged in his speech that the Israelites had not been able, through sheer human weakness, to fulfil every commandment of the law, and that Jesus Christ had done that for them by his death on the cross. Jesus in his ministry had stressed the fact that outward signs were no measure of a man's righteousness before God: only God could save us through His grace, and give man that righteousness which was made evident through the Holy Spirit working in and through the individual life.

Peter was backed up by Paul and Barnabas, in **verse 12**, who had countless stories to tell of the many hundreds of uncircumcised Gentiles who had come to faith in Christ throughout Galatia on their first missionary journey, faith that was authenticated by miraculous signs and wonders that God had done among them. It is interesting to note that, having played a vital part in the Christian cause by putting forward an unanswerable case for grace beyond works, Peter then disappears from the scene. It is as if Luke considers his work was done, although his ministry extended both in time and place for many more years.

It is to the credit of the whole assembly that "they became silent as they listened." Have you been in a meeting where "heat" has put out the "light?" Everyone being so anxious to put their point of view that they will not listen to anyone else. How many people do you know who really listen to another's story? They are few and far between. How much damage has been done in the Church because people would rather project themselves than work together on a united decision! What would Jesus do?

The Turning Point.

James, the brother of Jesus, had become the leader of the Jerusalem church. In **verses 13-21** he summed up the situation with consummate tact and grace, authenticating Peter's word by quoting from the Jews' beloved Old Testament, in **Amos 9:11,12**. He brought the authority of the prophet's word to bear on Peter's story, for there God had talked of the Gentiles who would bear His name. The inclusion of the Gentiles in the family of God was not God's Plan B: He had ordained it from the beginning and no-one had the right to question it.

So the Gentiles were to be assured that it was their faith in Jesus (something which gave women personhood too!) and not the outward sign of circumcision, which brought them salvation. However, there were 4 stipulations laid down which embodied the epitome of graciousness: the Jews were to accept their Gentile brothers just as they were, but the Gentiles were to understand that the Jews had sensitivities that were to be respected. Food that had been offered to idols would be sold at cheaper rates in the marketplace, but would never be bought by Jews who regarded such food as polluted by false religions, and who were therefore repulsed by anyone eating it. A hallmark of the early Christians was their habit of sharing fellowship over a meal, and for the Gentiles to abstain from such meat, even if they didn't personally consider it contaminated, would make it more congenial for Jew and Gentile to eat together. The stipulation against immorality was important because moral standards were taken far too lightly in Greek culture and both Jew and Gentile should accept God's standard, as His children.

The Church seems to have so many rules and regulations. Which ones are absolutely vital to the people of God? Which ones are important but not strictly essential to salvation? Which ones are simply leftovers from a previous culture and of no value today? And which ones are either helpful or damaging to those who are seeking to know Jesus? We need the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to give us the right answers!

Implementing the decision.

It must have been a wonderful moment of relief when the decision was accepted not only by the apostles and elders, but also by the whole church – **verses 22-33**. Every member counted! Notice that the letter, a masterpiece of tact and delicacy, was addressed not only to Antioch but to all the churches that had sprung up along the trail made by Paul and Barnabas. It came from "the apostles and elders, *your brothers*". And it was not enough for the Jerusalem church to hand down a ruling secondhand – it must be done properly and in person by some of their representatives. After careful thought they chose Judas and Silas (we'll see later that was an excellent choice) to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch with the momentous

document. Once there, the letter was read and brought much joy and encouragement to the Gentile believers, who no doubt had been puzzled, or hurt, or humiliated, by the earlier false teachers. It is lovely that Judas and Silas, stalwarts of the Jerusalem church, spent some time at Antioch and had much to say to encourage and strengthen their Gentile brothers. When they did eventually set off home to Jerusalem, these same brothers gave them the blessing of peace! I think there must have been a huge smile on the face of God!

If you are a parent, you know how important it is to you to have your children living together in harmony. Imagine how God must feel when His children cannot agree! How can we decide when to stand firm on our convictions, and when to compromise for the sake of peace? Who alone can give us that wisdom?

The juxtaposition of the story in the remaining **verses 36-41 of chapter 15** is supremely ironic. Paul and Barnabas, who had been used by God to deflect a major schism in the Church, now found they could not agree on a private matter! It was some time later, and here we should note that Paul spent quite a large amount of time in the church at Antioch, whereas with all his missionary journeys we are apt to think he was always travelling. The Antioch believers were strong in their faith, but still needed much teaching.

It is hard to imagine today what huge strides the Church had to take in its infancy, the biggest being the acceptance of Christianity as a movement in its own right and not merely as an extension, however worthy, of Judaism. Godly Jews gladly accepted God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ for them personally but it was harder for them to rejoice at His divine purpose in giving the gospel to Gentiles throughout the world! Paul and Barnabas, with their personal experience of the grace of God shown to the growing number of Gentiles, were the ideal teachers for the homogenous lot in Antioch!

So it is doubly sad that there came a bitter division between the two of them. Paul had the sensible idea of returning to the churches they had established in Galatia, to encourage and guide them in their faith. Barnabas was in full agreement and saw it as a great opportunity to give his nephew Mark a second chance. But Paul, the vehement, iron-willed stalwart for the right, would have none of it. It was important to have as their assistants only those who had proved themselves to be strong and reliable, and Mark had certainly failed horribly there. No, it was too great a risk: no personal weakness must be given the chance to spoil the work of the Lord.

It is a pity that Paul did not remember how Barnabas had twice put himself out to encourage the younger Paul as he grappled with a sense of failure. In many ways Paul had Barnabas to thank for his present dynamic ministry! In any case, the dispute between them was too bitter to be resolved. The word for "sharp disagreement" in verse 39 is "paroxusmos", in the Greek an uncommonly strong expression, and led to the inevitable parting of the ways.

The point is, though, that both those great leaders were actually in the right, from different points of view. Barnabas had the heart of a shepherd, and as a relative most likely had a greater knowledge of the depth and sincerity of Mark's repentance. Paul on the other hand, also had a shepherd's heart, and was concerned with the spiritual growth of the churches he was to visit and was reluctant to risk their ministry being marred by a second failure on the part of any member of the team.

From **verse 40** we can surmise that the church at Antioch sided with Paul. We can only guess at the feelings of Barnabas, who had been their leader before Paul even came onto the scene, and who now seemed to have been rejected. Who was there now to encourage this "Son of Encouragement" when he needed it? A lesser man might have been engulfed in bitterness and withdrawn from any future ministry. He might have poisoned Mark's mind, and the minds of his closest friends, against Paul. He might have ended up a sour-faced recluse. He did none of that. He simply took the hapless Mark and together they went off to Cyprus: after their one earlier visit they no doubt had much scope to encourage and build up the young church there. In later writings Paul speaks warmly of them both: some passages such as **Colossians 4:10, Philemon 23 and 2 Timothy 4:11** tell us that Mark "made good" eventually. During Paul's imprisonment in Rome, Mark had the courage to be a faithful visitor and helper, thereby risking imprisonment himself. By the end of his life Paul had such an admiration for Mark that he specifically requested his presence during his final days. Mark worked closely with Peter and this comes through in the gospel he wrote – the first gospel to be written and one packed with action and enthusiasm. Barnabas surely is to be thanked for that!

We cannot go through life without being disappointed by even our closest friends, and this naturally happens within the Church, made up as it is of humans. What should our attitude be to such people? Rejection, cold-shouldering, backbiting? Or an attempt to understand, accept and work in harmony with them? Jesus was often disappointed by His disciples: did He ever stop loving them?

It is a mark of the authenticity of the Bible that facts, good and bad, are presented honestly with no attempt to gloss over the unsavoury parts. Luke probably found it hurtful to record this incident, yet under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he was faithful to the truth.

And what can we learn from this story? We have the sad consolation that sometimes outstanding spiritual “giants” can hold irreconcilable opinions, and who can judge which one of them is right? Perhaps unwittingly Paul and Barnabas showed us the answer: while they could no longer work together, they both got on with the work of God in different spheres. Later, Paul was to write, perhaps ruefully, in **Ephesians 4:3**, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Sometimes it is better to part in peace than to tussle in turmoil.

The problem is alive and well today. Churches have split over opinions differing in smaller matters than this. Each church member is an individual and there is no point in yearning for uniformity. But what we can have is unity – a bond that is forged in the furnace of the love of God, given to us and given in turn to each other. Paul seemed to realise this, when in **1 Corinthians 13** he declared that “if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” Love is patient, kind, humble, unselfish, thoughtful, protecting, trusting and lasting: only from God, through His Holy Spirit, can we ever hope to hold and impart this love.