

Strengthening the Church Through Faithful Servants

Acts 15.36-16.5

December 31

Under the inspiration of the Spirit, Luke provided an accurate historical portrait of the early church. He narrated the mighty acts of the Spirit as well as the tension points caused by deception (Acts 5.1-11), discord (Acts 6.1-6), and doctrinal disputes (Acts 15.). This lesson focuses on tensions between missionary associates. Yet, none of these problems hindered the progress of the Gospel. Luke emphasizes the continual growth of the church despite these crucial issues (Acts 5.12-16; 6.7; 15.30-35). Church deception, disagreement, and disputes are complicated, yet ruptured personal relationships within the church may be the most painful and harmful.

What can believers learn about faithful servants strengthening the church?

First, recognize that godly people may disagree about personnel issues (Acts 15.36-39). During the so-called first missionary journey, the missionary team of Paul, Barnabas, and Mark focused on church planting. After the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas decided to revisit the new churches to strengthen the new believers and to “deliver the decision reached by the apostles and elders” regarding gentile inclusion within the church without the necessity of circumcision (Acts 16.4). Luke notes that “sharp disagreement” arose within the missionary team due to Mark’s abandonment of the first mission (Acts 13.13). The Bible does not pinpoint the reason John Mark abandoned the mission. Scholars set forth several possible reasons for Mark’s action: homesick, change in leadership from Barnabas to Paul, focus on Gentile outreach, or illness. Luke describes Mark’s action on the first missionary journey as desertion (Acts 15.38). Paul and Barnabas experienced an intense, emotional disagreement about Mark’s participation in the new mission.

Second, God can override personal disagreements for the furtherance of the gospel (Acts 15.40-41; 16.1-3). As a result of the personal dispute, Barnabas and Paul parted ways. As a result, two missionary teams focused on the same missionary goals of strengthening new churches and reporting the decision of Acts 15. Barnabas, a native of Cyprus, took his cousin John Mark (Col. 4.10) and revisited the churches started by the mission team of Paul, Barnabas, and Mark on Cyprus. Barnabas modeled a commitment to an individual that refused to give up on a failed believer. Mark likely benefited from both Paul’s sternness and Barnabas’ encouragement. Mark was associated with Paul during his Roman imprisonment (Col. 4.10; Philemon 24; 2 Tim. 4.11) as well as Peter (1 Pet. 5.13). Although Paul occasionally mentioned Barnabas in his letters, Luke never mentioned Barnabas after the missionary split.

Paul chose Silas or Silvanus as his new missionary associate. Paul may have found Silas’s leadership in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15.22) and Roman citizenship (Acts 16.37-39) beneficial in the mission cause. Because Jews accounted ethnicity through the mother, Paul circumcised the Jewish Timothy in order not to hinder missions to Jews. Paul and Silas revisited the churches founded by Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. He accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey and shared a brief imprisonment with Paul in Philippi (Acts 16). Silas also either served as Peter’s scribe or delivered the apostle’s first letter (1 Pet. 5.12).

During the missional journey of Paul and Silas, God added Timothy to the mission team. Paul referred to Timothy as his “child in the faith,” meaning that Paul was instrumental in Timothy’s conversion during the first missionary journey (1 Cor. 4.17; 1 Tim. 1.2; 2 Tim. 2. 1-2). As Paul revisited Timothy’s hometown, Timothy had developed a faithful reputation (v. 2). Timothy’s familial background in both Greek and Jewish culture assisted in Paul’s mission. Paul listed Timothy as co-sender in six of his letters.

Third, the addition of new team members resulted in the growth of the church (Acts 16.5). Luke describes the growth of the church concerning maturity and numbers. The verb “strengthened” describes becoming resolute and firm in the faith.