

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

R₂L – Resolved to Live: By God’s Guidance (Part 1)

Acts 15:36-16:10

Acts 15:36-41

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Before we begin, let me remind you what the book of Acts is about. It is imperative to keep this in mind as we read and study this book. This is a bit long, but it is important to remember. **The Book of Acts is the dramatic revelation of the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the church (Acts 1:8); accomplishing God’s salvific (His saving) purposes through the preaching of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 4:12); a work which began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-3) and which will continue until the return of our Lord for His church (1 Thessalonians 4:17).**

If the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) reveal to us God’s working through Christ, who was empowered by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16-17); the Book of Acts reveals Christ at work in the church through the sovereign guidance and actions of His Spirit. We too easily forget that the true title and description of this book out to be, “The Acts of the Holy Spirit Through the Apostles and the Church.” The key Character who is found at work throughout this book is the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who works to accomplish the will of God in and through the church. Let me quickly have you note the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts.

1. Jesus states that the Holy Spirit will come upon His disciples (Acts 1:8);
2. The Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples in Jerusalem empowering them to speak forth the gospel (Acts 2:4) and enabling Peter to preach the first church sermon (Acts 2:14ff); enabling Peter and John to heal the beggar and stand firm in their proclamation of Jesus before the Jewish leaders (Acts 3 – 4:8).
3. The Holy Spirit enables the congregation to speak forth the word of God boldly (Acts 4:31).
4. The Holy Spirit, who is God (Acts 5:3-4), is lied to and thus judgment falls upon Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5).
5. Because the apostles could not devote themselves to teaching the Word of God and care for all the needs of the people, men, “full of the Holy Spirit” were selected to serve the needs of the church (Acts 6).
6. The Holy Spirit enabled Stephen to boldly preach the gospel to the Jewish leaders even in the face of death (Acts 7).
7. The Holy Spirit enables Philip to preach the gospel to the Samaritans and, after that, by divine transportation, has Philip preach the gospel to the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8).
8. The Holy Spirit converts and fills Saul (Acts 9), who would become one of Christianity’s greatest spokesmen.

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

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9. The Holy Spirit, through the preaching of Peter to Cornelius and his household, converts, fills and saves Gentiles (Acts 10).
10. The Holy Spirit is at work in the church as Peter reports the working of the Spirit in the lives of Gentiles to the Jewish believers and is sovereignly protects Peter while in prison (Acts 11-12).
11. The Holy Spirit chooses Paul and Barnabas for the first missionary journey (Acts 13:1) and empowers them to preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. The Gentile believers are also empowered and emboldened by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:52).
12. In Acts 15, the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in bringing salvation to the Gentiles is reported and defended.

All of this brings us to the end of Acts 15 and into Acts 16, where we see the work of the Holy Spirit again in the lives of Paul, Barnabas and the church. In the text before us, we learn some valuable lessons as to how the Holy Spirit guides and directs His church and His people. The point to be made, the thing to be remembered, what needs to be indelibly impressed upon our hearts and minds as we read and study these things is this, *the recognition of the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit to accomplish the will of God in the life of the church*. And it can be even more personal by saying that as a believer, I need to recognize the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit working in and through the circumstances of my life to accomplish God's will.

This all begs a question; how does the church; and how do we as believers, come to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit and to know the will of God? Just how does God lead and guide us? That is a question with which we are always wrestling. How do we know the will of God? And how is God's will, as opposed to our own will or the will of others, recognized? There is a very simple answer to these questions. *The Holy Spirit leads and guides us into God's will through ALL (each and every one of our) circumstances*. The providential God (meaning – that God who brings things to pass in His own time) and the sovereign God (meaning – the God who is in control or command of all things); this providential and sovereign God (see if you have heard this before) causes ALL things (good or bad; planned or unplanned; beautiful or ugly) to work together for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

Now most of us do not have a problem believing that God is good, providential and sovereign; at least in theory. We state it! We tell others who are struggling or suffering to remember this. But too often, when the struggles are our own, when the suffering hits us, when things are personally difficult or outright bad; then we tend to forget, and fail to practice, to look and see just how God is leading and guiding us through those hard times. We need to remember that God, by His Holy Spirit, the Helper whom Jesus sent to be with us and in us, is working the good, the bad and the ugly to all be to our benefit.

This is what we find in our text. In the broader text of Acts 15:36-16:10, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is leading and guiding Paul, Barnabas, John Mark, Silas and the church through a variety of situations, some good, some bad, some are the result of stubborn, sinful behavior, and some are done out of pure obedience. As we look at these circumstances, we find means that the Holy Spirit uses to guide us into God's will; means that we need to know and recognize as believers if we would be joyful and of most service to our Lord and His church. Over the next couple of weeks, we are going to examine and seek application from these four means. This morning we look at one of the most odd of the means; one that may not sound right to you at first, but I promise, it's there, it's biblical and it's something we need to be exhorted to know and apply.

Before I share the first means with you, let me set the stage as we begin to look at these means by which believers are to be resolved – committed, determined and fixed on to live by God's guidance. We are at the close of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch. They had just scored a decisive and biblical victory. The question as to how a person, specifically how Gentiles are saved, had been answered and defended by the leaders of the Jerusalem Church. No one could or had to

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

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come to God by means of becoming Jewish, being circumcised, or by the keeping of the Law in order to be save. This is because it was affirmed that salvation was wholly accomplished by the work of Jesus upon the cross and that the only “requirement” for salvation is faith in Christ alone as having done everything necessary to that end.

Have you ever wondered what would have happened if the council had decided the other way? If they had concluded the salvation was by faith in Christ, plus the human work of becoming Jewish, then the evangelization of the Gentiles would have ended for all intents and purposes and the church, to this day, would be made up of those who were either Jewish by birth and practice as well as with those who become Jewish before becoming Christian. But, we proclaim the affirmation of Peter who said in Acts 15:11 – **“But we believe that we are saved through the grace (the undeserved, unmerited, unsolicited grace) of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”** This was the summary of the decision that was made. This was the victory.

Perhaps you have heard it said that it is not good to rest on one’s laurels – meaning, we are not to be satisfied with our past success to the extent that we consider further effort as unnecessary. Because of this victory, Paul was more determined than ever to take this affirmation that Jesus alone saves back to those to whom he had first preached. His plan was to retrace the steps of the first missionary journey, traveling again from Antioch, Syria to the island of Cyprus, then back up to Asia Minor to visit Perga, Attalia, Iconium and Lystra. This was Paul’s game plan. And, it seems to be a good plan. Paul and Barnabas were a great team. As they traveled together, they would correct the false teaching concerning Christ and salvation; exhort the people concerning God’s abundant grace, establish and encourage leadership in the churches, and to report the decision of the Jerusalem Council. They wanted to follow up on their converts. One of the mistakes that most churches make today regarding evangelism is their failure to recognize that it is not a one-time event; that evangelism is just step one in the process of making disciples, of making learners and followers of Jesus.

But then, according to our text, Paul’s plan gets messed up. And who is it that messes up Paul’s well-intentioned plan? It is God, the Holy Spirit. As we will see, Paul was sovereignly directed by the Holy Spirit from point A, which was Antioch to a new point B he had not considered, which would be across the Dardanelles Straits, the link between the continents of Asia and Europe that he might take the gospel to Europe itself. Have you ever had your plans messed up? Have you ever had God mess up your plans? What is fascinating about our text is the *means* God uses to mess up the plans or I mean guide Paul to go beyond his own plans in order to accomplish God’s greater plan. How does the Holy Spirit make all this known to Paul? How does God reveal His will and purpose to Paul? What we find here does not fit neatly into all the little formulas and ideas we often hear regarding the knowing of God’s will. Paul himself would not understand all that God was doing until much later when he and Luke would reminisce about these things.

So, what we see from Acts 15:36-41, the first of four means that the Holy Spirit used to direct Paul and the church to accomplish God’s will. And know this; the Holy Spirit continues to utilize these four means in believer’s lives today in order to reveal to them the will of God. How does the Holy Spirit guide His people to accomplish God’s purposes? In our text, we see that the Holy Spirit uses discord in order to accomplish God’s purposes. Yes, I said that the Holy Spirit uses discord. We will see how the Holy Spirit uses discord by walking through these verses noting the proposal of Paul (15:36); the problem of Paul and Barnabas (15:37-40); the providence of the Holy Spirit (15:39-41); and then close with looking at how we might practice (not discord, but) recognizing the Holy Spirit’s leading and guiding us through discord.

I. **The proposal of Paul (15:36)**

36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.”

This first means may seem strange and at odds with the person and character of the Holy Spirit; but Scriptures do teach that God uses discord to accomplish His purposes. It is not God’s discord, as God

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

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is in perfect unity and peace; but God does use the discord of man. Let me show you how we see this in our text.

Paul’s proposal in verse 36 seems reasonable enough. He wants to do a follow up to encourage the believer’s they visited on the first missionary journey. It was a splendid plan as Paul and Barnabas worked well together. Ever since Paul had been recruited by Barnabas to help with the ministry at the church in Antioch, their partnership was blessed by seeing unbelievers saved and believers strengthened in their faith. It would seem that the combination of Barnabas with his relational skills coupled with Paul and his communication skills of revealing Jesus from the Old Testament proved tremendously fruitful. Their first missionary journey united them in spirit and ministry, sharing not only in the fruits of ministry, but also in the wounds of ministry, making them closer than brothers. I imagine that in their two plus years together, they may have had some disagreements and even disappointed one another at times. That is an inevitable part of any friendship. But they had always worked through the problems, believing that the only thing that would separate them is death itself.

They not only had a great affection for one another, but notice that they wanted to see, not just hear, not just read about, but see with their own eyes; be face to face with those whom they had led to Christ. Have you led anyone to Christ? Are you a spiritual father or mother to someone? Do you long to know how he or she is doing spiritually? Have you expressed an interest in their spiritual well-being? What lengths are you willing to go to in order to have a continued impact upon the lives of those who have been saved and encouraged to follow Jesus as a result of your sharing Christ with them or because of the ministry and impact of your church upon his or her life? This was Paul’s proposal. But next we see that there is a problem.

II. The problem of Paul and Barnabas (15:37-40)

They never considered what problem was about to take place in verses 37-40 where we read:

37 Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. 38 But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. 40 But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.

Paul’s proposal ran into a problem. The problem was not in provisions, but in personnel. The problem was John Mark. You might remember back in Acts 13:13 that John Mark, after arriving in Asia Minor, determined to leave the team and go back to Jerusalem. We have no clear reason given for John Mark’s departure. We know that it came on the heels of the confrontation with Elymas, the wicked sorcerer on the island of Cyprus and after another ship journey to the mainland. There are a number of possibilities as to the reason or reasons. Perhaps John Mark was fearful, a bit unnerved as what he had witnessed. Perhaps he was unable to bear the burden of missionary life. He might have been sick, but this seems unlikely because of what Paul charges against John Mark as we will see in a moment. He may have been homesick. Some have suggest that he was displeased with seeing Paul become more prominent on the team over his cousin Barnabas. We just do not know for certain, but whatever the reason was, Paul called it desertion. The word “deserted” in verse 38 is a strong word meaning “to revolt or to stand far off.” It speaks of violently or resolutely falling away from something. We actually get our word apostate from this word. Paul was charging John Mark with purposely falling away from them. Paul believed it rose to the level of falling way from the faith. Paul was intense and seemingly relentless.

But Barnabas saw the whole incident differently. He believed that whatever the issues were in the past, they were in the past. He believed that John Mark had matured and deserved a second chance. No doubt Barnabas resented Paul’s rejection of his own cousin. The result of this discord, as stated in verse 39 was a “**sharp disagreement.**” This again is strong language that speaks of a violent and emotion

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

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exchange. Barnabas, the son of encouragement was discouraged and let Paul know. In short, these two were not happy with one another.

Who was right, Paul or Barnabas? It is hard to say. Perhaps both were partially right and partially wrong. It is interesting to note that later in verse 40 we read that Paul and Silas were, **being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord**. Did the congregation side with Paul on this? It would seem so to some extent. It is hard to imagine anything more heart wrenching than this; the two great missionaries; these two comrades of the faith, were now completely at odds with one another.

As we are well aware, Christians do not always agree. Now be careful with this. Paul and Barnabas agreed on that which was key and most important, the person and work of Jesus Christ. They were agreed that preaching salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone was imperative. They agreed that the churches need to be encouraged and the people trained. What they disagreed on was who should be part of this missionary outreach team. We need to remember that all Christians walk with limps; we all carry some vestiges of sin; that each of us still can act and react in ways we learned before we were believers or in times of disobedience to the Lord. The point is we need to rely upon God's grace as well as extend God's grace to one another. Husband and wives – you are married to sinners! Parents, you gave birth to sinners! You single or widowed among us, yes, you are sinners. Children, you are sinners and your parents are sinners! And let me tell you something, sinners are not easy to get along with because we all manipulate, strategize and plot ways in which to please ourselves, serve ourselves and hopefully along the way, get others to meet our selfish needs.

Listen to Martin Luther's own self-assessment. He said of himself, *“I am rough, boisterous, stormy, and altogether war-like, fighting against innumerable monsters and devils. I am born for the removing of stumps, and stones, cutting away thistles and thorns, and clearing wild forests.”* How would you like Luther to be your pastor? He stepped on more than just a person's toes and not always in the most godly of manners! But coming back to verse 39, what Paul and Barnabas had never imagined happened. Because of their unresolved problem, **“they separated from one another.”** They proverbially agreed to disagree and went in two different directions. Again, we read in verses 39-41, *39 And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. 40 But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*

With all this said, I have no doubt that Barnabas's ministry with John Mark was fruitful. We know that John Mark is eventually received by and counted as one of Paul's dearest co-workers (2 Timothy 4:11). But as Barnabas determined to leave Paul, we will hear of him no more. As he sails off to his native Cyprus, he sails out of history. In contrast to this, the ministry of Paul and Silas is well-known. But the point I would like to make is this, that somehow these two great men of God failed in their relationship. Discord was sown among them. We have no record that these men prayed together and determined this was for the best. There is no council between them where they considered separating for the good of the gospel. What happened here in these verses is not only discord among brothers, but is an utter failure between brothers in Christ.

So, we have seen the proposal of Paul (let's go and preach the gospel once again to the cities we had visited before); followed by the problem (discord over the participation of John Mark); and this brings us to our third point...

III. The Providence of the Holy Spirit (15:39-41)

39 And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. 40 But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Now then, what does all this have to do with the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit at work in lives of Paul and Barnabas? Before I tell you what it does men, let me tell you what it does not mean. The

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

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providence and sovereignty of the Holy Spirit does not mean that the Holy Spirit caused this discord. The “sharp disagreement” between Paul and Barnabas was driven by their own flesh. This was their failure. But here is the beauty; the Holy Spirit uses discord among believers to accomplish His purposes. How strange does that sound? The Holy Spirit uses discord among believers to accomplish His purposes.

Now, be careful and do not misunderstand or misuse what I am saying here. God does not want discord among the brethren. God does not cause discord among the brethren. God is not pleased with discord among the brethren. It is not God’s revealed will that we allow for discord in the church! We are not to excuse sinful behavior and/or hurtful words hurled at one another by saying, “Well, Pastor Ed said that the Holy Spirit uses discord so I am just trying to be an instrument of the Holy Spirit.” That is not biblical; that is not godly; that will not wash. Consider Proverbs 6:16-19:

16 There are six things which the Lord hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: 17 Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, 18 A heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, 19 A false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife (discords; quarrels; contentions; arguments; fights) among brothers.”

So then, why does the Holy Spirit use discord to accomplish His will? Because the sin and the stubborn heart of man will not EVER thwart the purposes and will of God. God repeatedly uses the sinful actions of people, actions chosen by those people, actions that those people will be accountable to God for doing as violations of His expressed will, to accomplish His even greater purposes. This is nothing new. This is biblical. Do you remember when Joseph’s brothers were concerned that he might bear a grudge against them because of the way they treated him and sold him into slavery when he was younger? How did Joseph respond? Look with me at Genesis 50:15-20. There we read:

15 When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!" 16 So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father charged before he died, saying, 17 'Thus you shall say to Joseph, "Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." 19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? 20 "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

Joseph would not question God’s providence (why He brought this to pass) or His sovereignty (why He allowed this) in allowing the evil of his brothers against him; for he realized that what his sinful brothers did to him, sowing their discord, was what God would use for the good of His people. There are many more examples but none greater than the one we saw back in Acts 2 and Acts 4. Let’s notice Acts 2:22-24 first where we read:

22 "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know — 23 this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. 24 "But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.

What men did in discord and rebellion against God, God used to accomplish His purpose in redemption. God does not condone the discord, but He does use it. We see this again in Acts 4:27-28,

Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

27 "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.

Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and the people of Israel were all against or in discord with God, but God used it to accomplish His purposes. So, what we need to see in Acts 15:36-41 is that even when good, godly people disagree and do not work things out biblically, this will not thwart the sovereign purposes of God. And what is God's purpose in the book of Acts? God's purpose is the salvation of the nations through the preaching and teaching and spreading of the gospel, the good news that Jesus is Savior and Lord. While God did not and does not cause discord among the brethren, He used it to guide both Paul and Barnabas into areas of increased service and fruitfulness. While it would have been God's preference for these two men to prayerfully seek His face and ask if they should split into two teams, God saw His effort doubled by sovereignly using these men's stubbornness to accomplish His will.

Too often we Christians get our feelings hurt by others to the point that we separate from one another. Sometimes it is just emotionally and sometimes it is physically. But we allow ourselves to be mad and upset over how the other one treated us and often fail to see how God used it accomplish something greater. We get so bent out of shape by what one sinner has done to us, another sinner, that we forget God's grace to overcome, we forget forgiveness, and if we leave ourselves in such a state, we can become miserable. However, even in all of this, for the child of God, God uses that discord to mold you and make you into the person He desires for further ministry.

Consider what other purposes were sovereignly accomplished through this falling out of Paul and Barnabas. Not only did God send two missionary teams, each headed by a remarkable man of God, but He supplied these teams with what they would need to be successful. As Paul's new partner, Silas brought a new set of gifts to the table, gifts that Barnabas did not have; gifts that would be invaluable to Paul. Silas was a Roman citizen, which would allow the two of them to have greater impact upon the Gentiles (16:37). Silas was a prophet, a forth-teller of the Word of God (15:32). Silas was apparently fluent in Greek, which would help as they preached deeper and deeper into Gentile areas. Silas may have served Paul as an amanuensis, a secretary that could write Paul's letters as he dictated them (1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:1 – and he may have even helped Peter write 1 Peter – see 1 Peter 5:12).

Beloved, we need to remember that while God does not cause or condone discord, discouragement or disputes among His redeemed, when it happens, the Holy Spirit will use it to lead and guide us into new and varied ways of ministry. Perhaps you have had a falling out with a brother or sister in Christ. Perhaps you avoid him or her, trying to protect yourself and your emotions. Perhaps you have let it scar you in some way, thinking what someone did to us is bigger than God's grace to change us and get us past it.

If you find yourself in such a condition, would you prayerfully ask the Lord how He, in His good providence and sovereignty, is leading and guiding you to be the person He wants you to be; not so you can be hurt, bitter and aloof, but rather so you can be grateful to God, rejoicing and available for ministry.

Soli Deo Gloria

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