

Acts 15:36-41: Has Someone Shown You How to Be a Christian?

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I. Introduction

To be a Christian is to be like Jesus in every way, to think, talk, and act like Him. And if you want to be like Jesus, you have to follow Him. This is how kids learn to be adults by imitating their parents. And this is the case with any complex and fulfilling endeavor: if you want to be a master plumber or surgeon, you have to apprentice under a master and do it the way they do. But in the Christian life, you not only learn it to do it yourself, you learn it to show others how to be like Jesus. That's a disciple of Christ, one who follows Jesus and teaches other how to follow Him too. So, has anyone shown you how to walk with the Lord and have you in turn shown others?

II. Acts 15:36-41: Do You Know How to Walk with Jesus and Therefore How to Show Others?

15:36, having settled the issue of the Gospel at the Jerusalem Council—that the only requirement for salvation is faith, whether Jew or Gentile—and bringing back this great news to the church at Antioch, Paul and Barnabas continue teaching and preaching the Word of the Lord in Antioch. But then Paul decided that it was time to visit every church they planted in order to further their discipleship. When you bring someone to Christ, you should show them how to live like Him. This is what Jesus did with His disciples and before He left, He instructed them to do likewise with the nations of the world (Matthew 28:19-20). This was especially important to Paul now because of the recent fight over the Gospel, i.e., the believers in Galatia needed to know how to stand in the truth the way Jesus did when someone is trying to add to it or twist it (Matthew 4:1-11).

15:37-41, then we read something astonishing, astonishing because it does not reflect well on the Church nor on two of its top leaders: Barnabas and Paul. They had a heated disagreement which ended in a split. It's all the more remarkable in light of the Jerusalem Council which just happened; it ended in unity and Paul and Barnabas were on the same side. But now there is serious tension between them. Why? They both agreed to go on this Second Missionary Journey, but they did not agree that they should take John Mark. If you recall, they had taken him with them on the First Missionary Journey (Acts 12:25; 13:5). But John soon abandoned this mission (Acts 13:13). And this is precisely why Paul did not want to take John with them; he abandoned them in Pamphylia. Barnabas on the other hand was adamant that they should take John with them. Who was right and why would God include this embarrassing story about two of the Church's top leaders?

God is not about to sugarcoat anything. The Bible is full of embarrassing moments like this, especially involving individuals Christianity deems as great men and women of the faith. Instead of hiding all this, God reveals it to teach us that men and women of the faith, even the greatest ones, are still human, still flawed. But no matter how flawed God is able to overcome our weaknesses and turn a messy, embarrassing situation into something incredible.

Why did Paul feel so strongly? He's got a very good point, why take someone who might abandon the mission again, especially if persecution arises once again. Not only will they have to worry about their next move, but Mark's wellbeing if he panics. We also have to remember who Paul is: he has a very strong personality, which is why he was so effective as a persecutor of the Church and now as Christ's apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 8-9; 13-28).

Why was Barnabas so insistent on taking John Mark? You might think that it was because he was his cousin (Colossians 4:10) so right or wrong, family comes first. Barnabas doesn't strike me as the type to side with family even if it's wrong (Acts 11:24). Instead, how did he get his name? His name was Joses, but the apostles changed it to Barnabas, it means Son of Encouragement (Acts 4:36-37). The reason Barnabas wanted to give Mark another chance is not because he was family, but because this is who he is: he encourages people, discipleship is at his core. He will continue to show anyone who's willing how to walk with the Lord, even if he has to give them one more chance. In fact, didn't he do this for Paul? When no one wanted anything to do with Paul, Barnabas stepped up and encouraged him (Acts 9:26-27). He was by Paul's side at the beginning of his ministry and the one who brought him to Antioch from Tarsus (Acts 11:25-26). When no one wanted to give Paul a chance, Barnabas did. Yes, Mark may've abandoned them before, but Barnabas thought he could work with him and make him an effective servant of the Lord.

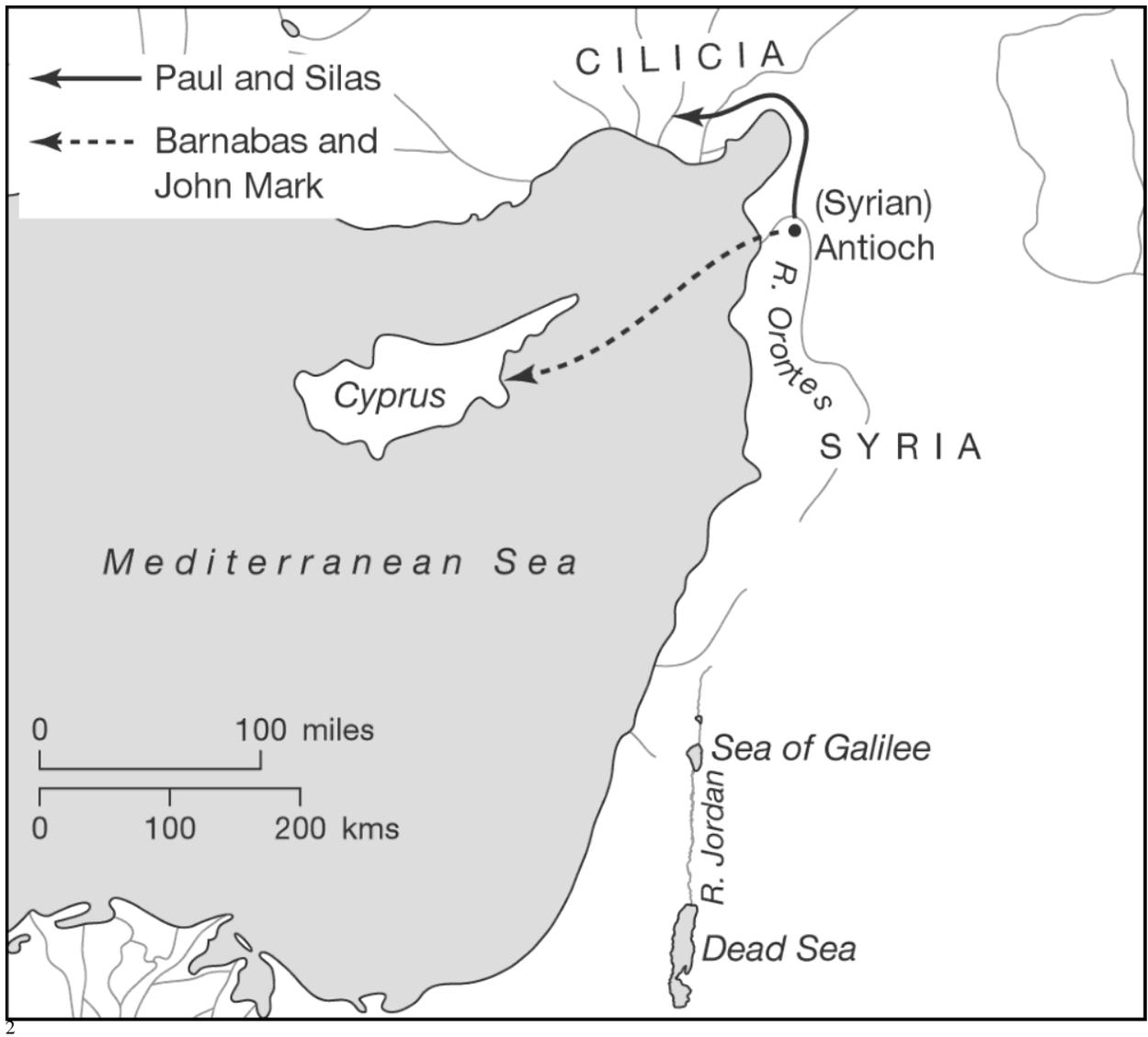
So who was right? It appears that both were. They both had good reasons for their position. Was this sin, is it OK for fellow Christians to disagree? The problem is not in disagreeing, even on serious matters, as we saw with the Jerusalem Council—the Gospel was at stake! The problem is in how we disagree. We can disagree but it must not be disagreeable. And herein *may* lie the sin in all this (since we have few details, we don't know for sure). If they held on to their anger, then it was sin (Ephesians 4:26-27). God must have unity in His Church; He cannot have His children divided (Ephesians 4:1-6). When you disagree, your goal is not to win the argument, but the one you're arguing with; Christ wants us to show them the same love that He showed us (Ephesians 5:2). Did Paul and Barnabas patch things up? Yes, Paul and Barnabas later worked together again (1 Corinthians 9:6). In fact, Paul and Mark worked together again; Mark was so useful that he proved to be an asset to Paul (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24). Thus, Barnabas showing Mark how to face difficult ministry the way Jesus did paid off.

What's more amazing about all this is how God used it to not only fulfill Paul's original desire—to further disciple all the new Christians they brought to Christ—but how God used it to further the Gospel in brand new territory. That is, Barnabas took Mark and began visiting all the new churches he and Paul planted, starting with Cyprus. This freed Paul to continue spreading the Gospel in new territory. Thus Paul took Silas¹ and went in the other direction discipling the churches in Syria and Cilicia (churches that Paul may've established during his years in Cilicia, Acts 9:30; 11:25). But he and Silas also traveled to new places like Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth as they continued bringing more Gentiles to Christ and showing them how to walk with Him. Thus God turned a dispute between two brothers into a blessing for the Gentiles and the Church.

When Paul and Silas left they were commended to the grace of God by the church in Antioch. There's no such commendation of Barnabas and Mark and this is the last time Acts mentions either. However, this doesn't mean that Barnabas was wrong and Paul was right. It may be that Luke didn't mention Barnabas' and Mark's commendation because the latter half of Acts is not about the activities of Barnabas, but Paul.

Do you know how to be a Christian, has someone shown you? Paul and Barnabas were not just making believers in Christ. They were showing them how to be like Jesus in every way. Mark needed to be strong and courageous like Jesus. The believers in Galatia needed to know how to stand in the truth like Jesus did. How about you, where is your life lacking? Where are you not living like Jesus and has someone shown you? If someone did show you, have you shown others what the Lord taught you through them? Paul always had a team of people around him, he was discipling them, showing them how to walk with Christ, how to be like Him (1 Corinthians 11:1).

¹ Silas is also known as Silvanus, his Roman name (2 Corinthians 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1). He was a Roman citizen, which will prove useful later on (Acts 16:37). He was a prophet of God and leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:22, 27, 32). He also worked with Peter and John Mark (1 Peter 5:12-13).



III. Conclusion

Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing."

² Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28* (p. 52-53). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.