

The Relentless Gospel - Acts 15:36-41  
Fractures and Failures cannot stop the Gospel's Advance.

Reading:

Romans 15:5-6 “<sup>5</sup>Now may the God who gives<sup>[b]</sup> endurance and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, according to Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>so that you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one mind and one voice.

Intro: In God’s Kingdom, leaders are a dime a dozen. Every leader is a tool in the hands of God to accomplish great things, but no tool is greater than the work it creates. Furthermore, a leader's failure can harm, undermine, or even opposed God's gospel message. However, they will never stop the Gospel's relentless advance.

As the gospel advances in the Greco-Roman world, it has been opposed religiously, politicly, socially, theologically, racially, and today relationally. Sin and its effect have marred every paradigm of creation and human life. Even strong friendships, faithful to God's Gospel, are set at odds with one another. Yes, relationships amongst church leaders oppose the Gospel's advance, but it cannot stop God's relentless Gospel from going forward.

Today, we look at God’s word to grasp the importance of Christian leadership and how God uses flawed yet faithful men and women to carry on his mission to seek and save the lost. Will you pray with me?

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**Leaders are flawed, but the Gospel is not.**

Acts 15:36-39a “<sup>36</sup> After some time had passed, Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s go back and visit the brothers and sisters in every town where we have preached the word of the Lord and see how they’re doing.” <sup>37</sup> Barnabas wanted to take along John who was called Mark. <sup>38</sup> But Paul insisted that they should not take along this man who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone on with them to the work. <sup>39</sup> They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company,”

We are coming out of an essential passage in the life of the church. Paul and Barnabas are taking the decision of the Jerusalem council back to Antioch and the surrounding churches. Their message is simple. The gentiles are full members of God's church and family without the need for circumcision or Jewish conversion. To that, we say, "Yes and Amen," but Paul and Barnabas come to an impasse over John Mark.

John Mark is Barnabas' cousin and had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey until he deserted them back earlier Acts (). We cannot know why John Mark left them, but Luke records it negatively as abandonment. Giving the connotation of being a "backslider." These missionary journeys are challenging, and walking was the easy part. They contended with severe weather, responsible for finding food and shelter. Ramping up from those challenges was sickness and persecution. According to historical records, Rome quarantined the area of Pamphylia due to a viral outbreak. Paul and Barnabas's decision to journey there undoubtedly causes Paul to get sick. These journeys are hard, arduous, and life-threatening. John-Mark could not hang. In Paul's view, this is a deal-breaker.

Yet, in Jerusalem, John Mark reunites with Paul and Barnabas, but Paul can't see beyond Mark's previous actions. Barny is willing to move on, always as the encourager, and ironically Barny shows to Mark the same second chance he gave to Paul years earlier. *We must ask a question, why does Luke feel the need to record this account? Better yet, why does God want this in his inspired word?*

**Conflict is Inevitable** – Every Church has conflict, large or small; it's always here because fallen and faulty people make up the church. On top of that, fallen and faulty people lead the church. In Paul and Barnabas' case, the conflict centered around what they believed was more important. Paul's focus was on the work, and Barnabas was on the person. Barnabas wanted to give John Mark a second chance. Paul didn't want to risk jeopardizing his apostolic call to preach the Gospel. The two could not agree.

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**Conflict Leads to Division** – The result of all conflict and strife is division. A separation of friendship, companionship, or partnership. Sadly, two pillars of the church part ways over a seemingly mild disagreement. It's not even theological; Paul doesn't trust John Mark. So, they split ways, **but who was right?** We don't know because we are not told directly, but this is a failure in church leadership. Unity is a central ethic within the church promoted by Jesus in his prayer in John 17 (May they be one as we are one) and Paul himself in Ephesians 4 (There is one faith, one baptism...). Despite their flaws, God can still use them. That's because **God does not plan for our failures, but he does plan around them.** Think of Joseph's response to his brothers in Gen. 50, "You meant it for evil but God used it for good." Instead of only one team leaving to strengthen the churches, God has two.

**Reconciliation is Nonnegotiable** – We believe in a God of reconciliation. He reconciles us to himself through faith in Jesus. We are to be as he is. When I got into town in the first couple of months of being at CCC, I encouraged a family that seemed to be around a conflict. After some time, the husband admitted they are self-proclaimed bridge burners. When a dispute arises, they move on never restore fellowship. It was only a matter of time before they left the church without any desire to work out our differences. Is this God's standard for his church? No.

**Matthew 5:23-24** - 23 So if you are offering your gift on the altar, and there you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

2 Cor. 5:8 **"<sup>18</sup> Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."**

As Christians, the air we breathe is reconciliation first with God, then with each other.

Does the Apostle Paul leave their relationship as the status quo? No, Paul's heart softens towards John Mark immensely. In 2 Timothy 4:11, he writes to Timothy in Jail, saying, **"<sup>11</sup> Only Luke is with me. Bring Mark with you, for he is useful to me in the ministry."** Quite a far cry from the sharp disagreement of our passage. Isn't God amazing? He entrusts flawed and faithful people with his message of reconciliation because they are the perfect candidates to display reconciliation. We reveal what God wants to do.

**Illustration:** Before being called to pastor at CCC, I was at a good church with flaws or blind spots. After 6 years of being a youth pastor I had been told I would be moving into an associate role. 2 years from being told the goal post for my advancement kept getting moved.

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\*\*\*(Other Illustration) I had been there eight years so far, and before my 4<sup>th</sup> son, Theo, was born, the sr. pastor of 33 years decided to retire. Despite being the associate pastor, preaching regularly, I was excluded from any participation in who the next pastor would be or what was next for the church. (Ex of announcements and Darcie knowing.) Despite requesting to know what they were considering in a new pastor...

We reconciled before leaving, and I would gladly shake hands and share a meal with each of them today. Although each of us was flawed, we each had the conviction of the Spirit to reconcile with each other. [God used the circumstances to move me to Idaho, but they never lead to breaking fellowship with my brothers.](#)

That's because the elders and I understood the high calling of Christian leadership and the sacrifices needed to serve faithfully. So did Paul, that's why he had too many doubts about John-Mark. In the very next passage, Paul add

**Identify and deploy qualified leaders who understand the calling.**

**Acts 16:1-2 “16 Paul went on to Derbe and Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a believing Jewish woman, but his father was a Greek. <sup>2</sup> The brothers and sisters at Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him.”**

Paul sets out with Silas on his journey, and Timothy catches the Apostle’s attention. He sees something in Timothy that the testimony of the towns affirms. Notice Luke's inclusion of Timothy's parents. His mother was a Jew, but his father, a Greek. Socially and culturally, he is not Jewish, although we read of his trustworthy reputation. To the Jews ever on Paul's heels, the ones sowing seeds of discourse, they would undoubtedly target Timothy's muddled identity. It would act as their beachhead to undermine Paul’s message.

Proclaiming that message comes with a high calling. What ought we know about Christian leadership to know why Paul selects Silas, Timothy, and doubted John Mark?

**Christian leadership is a high calling.**

Hebrews – 13:7 “<sup>7</sup> Remember your leaders who have spoken God’s word to you. As you carefully observe the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith”

Leaders are the tangible example of godliness in the church, or they are supposed to be. God knows a leader's flaws, so first instructs us to examine their life then imitate their faith. My grandpa taught me a valuable principle young in life, "I follow and trust the word of old dead guys, because they finished the race well and won't let you down." Men like John G. Paton, George Whitfield, John Bunyan, Martin Luther. That is not to say I don't examine the life of men and women who I would consider mentors.

Elder and Deacon – 1 Tim. Living a life above reproach requires sacrifices, self-denial, and often suffering as a means to further the Gospel. Answering the high calling of church leadership reveals the greater responsibility need to fulfill the calling.

**Christian leadership has great responsibility.**

Acts 16:3 “<sup>3</sup> Paul wanted Timothy to go with him; so he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, since they all knew that his father was a Greek.”

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This seems like a step backward in Paul's mission to take the decision of the Jerusalem church who just affirmed Gentiles no longer need to be Jewish to be Christian. This is the same Paul who will write in **Galatians 5:3, 6 pens, "3I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law...6For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love."** How do we reconcile the contention between Paul's words and his actions?

When Paul invites Timothy to join him on his journey, he invites him to be discipled by him. The goal of a disciple is to become in every way like his master, and that includes his master's ministry. Paul requires Timothy's circumcision, not for his salvation, but to carry on his work. He is opening opportunities for Timothy to share the Gospel in arenas he could not otherwise. Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles, but he begins preaching the Gospel in the synagogues. (Paul looked in every way like a Jewish Rabbi and is often invited to speak) Therefore, Paul removes whatever barrier he can between a person and their ability to hear the message of the cross.

On Sundays, we (pastors) are burdened with a desire for the cross to be the only thing a person wrestles with or stumbles over. We want the message of Christ and him crucified to be the only stumbling block. That means if we can remove barriers or inhibitors to that message, we'll do it. That is a great responsibly place on the church leaders, one they wear like clothing and take up residence in their heart. It's there because God has placed it in leader's hearts knowing their call is not complete until the Lord returns or calls them home.

**Ephesian 4: 11 And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ" Equip the body**

### **Christian leadership comes with stricter judgment.**

James 3:1 "Not many should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we will receive a stricter judgment." – Anyone who teaches will be judged harshly.

**"If you can do anything else first, do it." Ill. Math Major.**

Hebrews 13:17 – "17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, since they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you."

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Why would anyone say "yes" to being a church leader? Why would Timothy, Paul, Barnabas, Peter, John, and leaders throughout church history, all of whom know the challenges of the calling, still say, "yes."

**God advances his Gospel.**

Acts 16:4-5 *"4 As they traveled through the towns, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem for the people to observe. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers."*

Despite my flaws and the flaws of the leaders I've served with, nothing compares to seeing God's glory on display when a sinner believes in Jesus. Nothing quite matches the joy when a believer grows in the grace and knowledge as a disciple. Nothing compares to the glory revealed in the Gospel's advance.

Paul will write in 1 Cor. 3, "God gives the growth." He may use Peter, Apollos, Paul, or many of you, but he is the power for growth and the recipient of it. Despite Paul and Barnabas breaking fellowship for a time, the church still grew.

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## **Application**

**Mend broken relationships** – Joy in the Lord and what he can do. Fulfill the ministry entrusted to us and display reconciliation with the ones you need to. If you need a mediator anyone of the pastors and elders can walk you through steps of reconciliation.

### **Recruit, Train, and Deploy Faithful leaders.**

We want to give ministry away and equip you to build up this body into Christ's image. Many of you are called to become discipleship leaders here at CCC. You're gifted with the ability to teach, shepherd, or lead. Next month on August 27<sup>th</sup> we invited to be trained as a leader. Leadership essentials training.

Mark Dever has said, "God buries the man but never the message." No matter who is an elder or pastor, God's gospel advances. Let's pray