

A REGRETTABLE INCIDENT

Acts 15:36-41

This is one of the ugly blots on the pages of Christian literature. Yet, it is the most natural and reasonable. One of the strong evidences of the inspiration of the Scriptures is that it is so frank in dealing with its heroes. It gives the unsightly spots in the lives of its noblest men and women. They are never shielded for effect.

I. The Occasion of the Quarrel. Verse 36.

Paul and Barnabas were about to launch upon a second missionary journey. This journey grew out of Paul's interest in the converts made during the first evangelistic tour. The great missionary was not satisfied with tarrying in Antioch. Doubtless the door was wide open for preaching the Word in the Syrian capitol, but Paul's heart was with his inexperienced brethren in far-off Pisidia and Lyconia. Hence his proposal to Barnabas, -- "Let us return now and visit the brethren in every city wherein we have proclaimed the Word of the Lord and see how they fare." That Paul intended to confine the proposed visit to the churches already founded we can hardly believe. But it is a noticeable fact that the strengthening of the native churches was regarded by these pioneer missionaries as of the first importance in the evangelizing of heathen peoples. They had ordained them elders, and appointed leaders in every city, and commended them to the Lord, on whom they had come to believe.

But now Paul was anxious to know how they were getting along. He had planted lights in dark places, so he was anxious to know if those lights were shining all around them. Founded by missionaries, they were to be missionary churches. Only thus could the missionary propaganda spread from place to place and people to people. And this was the apostle's thought -- if we are to conquer the world for Christ, we must confirm the feeble churches and make them strong to spread abroad the glad tidings. This proposal of a second evangelistic tour was the occasion of a quarrel between these old friends.

II. The Cause of the Quarrel. Verse 37.

Barnabas responded heartily to the proposition of his old comrade and seemed quite as willing to go as Paul himself. Barnabas wanted to take with them again his nephew, John Mark. Paul was not willing to take him. He was unwilling to take him along because John Mark had failed them on a former occasion. He had gone with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey in the capacity of an assistant. When the party reached Perga in Pamphylia, "John departed from them and returned to Jerusalem." Why he left the party is not recorded, but the fact that he withdrew from them denotes decided blame. Perhaps Mark's courage failed him; perhaps there was a change of plan, relative to the course they should take; perhaps Mark was just homesick; anyhow, Mark was wrong. Paul thought that he left them without any justifiable reason whatever.

Barnabas was naturally attached to his kinsman and thought it would be mutually advantageous to give his nephew another trial. The contention of Barnabas for wanting to take him did not commend itself to Paul. And this difference of judgment grew into feelings of personal alienation. It led to sharp contention and division. The contention became so sharp that the two good men were unable to work together. Paul took Silas and went his way. Barnabas took his nephew, Mark, and he went in another direction.

III. Who Was Right? Verse 38.

Which of these two good and great men was right, and which was wrong, in this dispute? Observation, and likely experience, teaches us that in affairs of this sort, rarely is one of the parties altogether wrong and the other altogether right. Generally, a measure of blame attaches to each, and generally, each is contending for a principle. It was so in this case. Each was contending for something that was worthy. Paul wanted Mark to know that the work of the Lord must not be treated so lightly. Barnabas, who did not condone Mark's action, wanted to give the young man a chance to retrieve his character. Both these purposes are worthy.

Most people are of the opinion that Paul was more nearly right than Barnabas. The judgment of Barnabas was likely to be biased in favor of John Mark by the fact that he was his kinsman. It is altogether probable, too, that Barnabas, with his usual greatheartedness, may have thought that, notwithstanding his previous conduct, John possessed admirable qualifications for the missionary service, and that it was hardly fair to turn him down after a single trial. The desire to advance one's kindred in church or state has always been a great temptation and has grown to be a great evil, in which private interests override the public good. Nepotism deserves the frowns of all good people.

It is further noticeable that Paul's objection to Mark was founded on the latter's withdrawal from the work when it was becoming more difficult, and when his services were more sorely needed. He had been quite willing to be a missionary among his kindred in Cyprus, but lost heart for the service as they turned their faces to the mountainous regions of Phrygia. Such a man, Paul thought, was not of the right kind of stuff to make a missionary. He had put his hand to the plow, and, looking back, demonstrated his unfitness for a life of self-denying evangelism.

IV. The Consequences of the Quarrel. Verses 39-40.

1. In the case of Paul.

- (1) Paul went away with the blessing of the church upon him. Verse 40.
This indicates that the sentiment was in Paul's favor, because Barnabas apparently went without any notice by or commendatory farewell from the church.
- (2) Paul was hindered in his work on this journey.
We have no record that he organized any new churches. He revisited the ones organized on his former journey, but his courage and spirit were not equal to what they were on the first journey. His conscience may have bothered him about that quarrel. He may have labored under a mental burden.
- (3) But on this trip he found Timothy.
This alone justified the journey. To discover a good man is worth living a lifetime. The greatest discovery in the world is the discovery of a noble man.

2. In the case of Barnabas.

Barnabas was not heard from; he dropped out of sight. Was it because he did nothing worthy of record? We are sure that was not the case, but it was because Paul was the man who occupied the center of the picture. In the long after-years the work of Barnabas was disclosed. He had made a man out of John Mark. He had saved him, and he was worth saving. There was good stuff in Mark, as subsequent events showed.

Chrysostom said that this strife between Paul and Barnabas was a great service to Mark, for the sternness of Paul brought a change in his mind, while the kindness of Barnabas did not allow him to feel abandoned. One could never know what would have become of John Mark if Barnabas had not had patience and stood by him when Paul cast him out.

Next to discovering a good man is rescuing a man from a great danger. To salvage the wreck and reconstruct it for useful service is a glorious achievement. One thought contained in this incident is that the step from grace to disgrace can be easily taken.

Both Paul and Barnabas wrote a great chapter in Christian literature on these journeys. Paul found a man on whom he could lay his mantle. Barnabas rescued a man who wrote one of the Gospel records.

Years pushed these workers apart; if they had frequent contacts no historian has told us about them. Old age brought them together again, both mellowed in spirit. John Mark, the cowardly, homesick youth, became a valuable worker in the kingdom of God. The aged Paul called for him in the evening of life and testified to Mark's usefulness in the ministry. One could wish that he might have slipped into that cold prison and have seen the meeting of those two men. All the animosity had passed away. The warmest Christian confidence and fellowship bound them together as life's sun sank upon the great old apostle.

God had overruled the controversy to the doubling of the missionary forces, and two bands went forth to publish the glad tidings where it had been man's plan to send but one. God often makes the foibles and differences of his servants to increase the working force of those who serve Him. As we take leave of this story let us resolve that our tenderness shall not degenerate into softness, nor our severity into harshness.

CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENT

Acts 16:1-5

In this second missionary journey Paul and Silas took the overland route through Asia Minor. The whole journey from Antioch to Derbe was through a wild and mountainous region, probably on foot and through many difficulties, "with perils of robbers" on every hand. At derbe they came to the place where the first missionary journey had ended.

Luke's narrative brings to our notice another convert of this region, one who was destined to fill an important place in Paul's life and ministry. He had been converted during the Apostle's previous visit. His name was Timothy. His was a singularly lovable character, and one of the most interesting of the Apostolic history. He became the most intimate and faithful adjutant of the Apostle Paul from this time on to the end of his missionary career and martyrdom.

I. The Background of a Good Man.

1. While the father of Timothy was not a Jew, he had a good record and was well thought of by both Jews and Greeks. He was a man whose life was so honorable that he silenced the critics.
2. Timothy had a great heritage in his parents.
Any man who has noble parents has a great heritage. To inherit a good name means more than great wealth. It means much to be well-born. Every man and every woman should remember that their unborn children have a right to a good name.
3. While it is possible for a young man to rise above the sordid name of an unworthy father, yet it is difficult to do so. The ones who do it are few; many are cursed from the cradle. They go through life with the ghost of a bad name trailing them. The public will not forget the father's unworthiness.

4. If parents would be respected by their children, let them live respectable lives. If they would be honored, let them be honorable.

II. The Foreground of a Good Man.

1. It is well to have a good start in life, but it is not sufficient. Many noble fathers have unworthy sons. This may be due to the fact that the son tries to ride the reputation of his father. This may work for a brief time but not indefinitely. There will come a time when the son must stand on his own merit.
2. Let one's future not be blocked by useless rubbish. Timothy was willing to be circumcised, not because it was essential to salvation, but because it would have been a stumbling block in the way of the Jews if he had not done so. This would have been a fine opportunity for an extremist to refuse to yield to public sentiment, but it was also a fine time for common sense. He could have had his future wrecked by a worthless contention.
3. Timothy took the long look. He reasoned well. The course he pursued would remove the difficulties with the Jews without creating difficulties among the Gentiles.

In the preceding chapter we found Paul contending that it was not necessary for a man to be circumcised; now we find that he required Timothy to be circumcised. Why the change of mind? Again, the answer is common sense. It was not necessary in order to be saved, but it was necessary in order to keep down prejudice. Because of existing conditions it may be necessary to do some things that are useless. Paul saw to it that Timothy was circumcised in concession to his Jewish brethren in order that the work of evangelization might not be hindered. Paul knew that the Gospel must in most places get its first public hearing in the synagogue, and an uncircumcised man would not be allowed the privilege of teaching in such places of assembly.

III. The Higher Ground of a Good Man.

1. Timothy is one character in the Bible about whom there is no word of depreciation. He lived on a high plane. He was always found with noble people. He was busy doing good things. There was no place nor time in his life for Satan to get control of his program.
2. He never lived a compromising life. He never left men in doubt about what he believed, what he was ready to do, or where he was ready to go. He was wholly committed to his task. The upward climb of this lad was an unceasing joy to Paul who had discovered him.