***He Didn’t Have to Do It***

**Summer 2022, Acts 15:36-16:5 July 17, 20212**

***As they [Paul, Silas and Timothy] traveled from town to town,  
they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders  
in Jerusalem for the people to obey.  
So the churches were strengthened in the faith  
and grew daily in numbers.*Acts 16:4-5**

**Yes, sometimes believers disagree (God can still be glorified!)**

*36 Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. 39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*

*He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. 2 The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.*

Acts 15:36-6:5

1. Paul is ready for theiri mission to continue: evangelizing and overseeing

2. The “disagreement” is about personality rather than truth, so a separation can be peaceful  
(see Hebrews 10:24 for a positive aspect, but Acts 17:6 and 1 Corinthians 13:5 for the negative)

3. Timothy is circumcised in order to be able to minister to the Jewish community

4. The result of separation and circumcision (wrong?!?) is stronger faith and more conversion

**Lystra and Derbe were a very important visit**

*19 Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. 20 But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.*

*21 They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. 23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.*

Acts 15

1. Timothy grew where Paul was left for dead, where Timothy know there would be “hardship”

2. Timothy was the result of a faithful mother (2 Timothy 1:3-7) and a strong church (Acts 14:23)

3. The problem: Timothy comes along after the “circumcision party” is shown to be wrong

4. The solution: Timothy sets aside his liberty (see Philippians 2:5-11) so serve the other

**The Titus problem: chronology and theology**

*Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. 2 I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. 3 Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. 4 This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. 5 We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you*.

Galatians 2

1. It is very difficult to know exactly where Galatians 2 fits in the timeline of Acts

2. Paul seems to be making Titus’ refusal to be circumcised a “truth of the gospel” matter

3. Before Timothy was an example of love saying “yes”, Titus was an example of truth saying “no”

**Lessons to learn from Timothy**

1) God started early in Timothy’s life, long before Paul showed up in Lystra

*3 I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. 4 Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. 5 I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. 6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. 7 For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.*

2 Timothy 1:3-7

2) God may call Titus to something totally different than he calls me (and it may cost me dearly!)

19 *For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”*

Galatians 2:19-21

**Resources for further studies in Acts**

The Bible Project team has great stuff on Acts at [*https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg*](https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg)

Spurgeon has fewer sermons on Acts available than I would hope at [*http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/index/r\_ac.htm*](http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/index/r_ac.htm) *.* His “Gospel Missions” sermon is at [*http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols1-3/chs76.pdf*](http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols1-3/chs76.pdf)

Tim Keller has said much on the topic of mission. See “5 Practices” at [*https://brave.is/5-practices-of-a-missional-church-tim-keller/*](https://brave.is/5-practices-of-a-missional-church-tim-keller/)and [*https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/gospel-culture-and-mission-an-interview-with-tim-keller/*](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/gospel-culture-and-mission-an-interview-with-tim-keller/)

Kim Riddlebarger has an interesting article on Acts 15 at [*https://www.kimriddlebarger.com/the-riddleblog/three-take-aways-from-the-jerusalem-council-acts-15*](https://www.kimriddlebarger.com/the-riddleblog/three-take-aways-from-the-jerusalem-council-acts-15)

Deffinbaugh has a helpful introduction at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/unique-contribution-book-acts*](https://bible.org/seriespage/unique-contribution-book-acts )  
His Acts series is at [*https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts*](https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts)His sermon on this text is at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10*](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10)

John Stott’s *The Spirit, The Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990) and F. F. Bruce’s work: *New Testament History* (Doubleday, 1980) and *The Book of the Acts* (Eerdmans, 1984). For this passage, I also like Kistemaker’s commentary (Baker Book House, 1990).

R. C. Ryle has a wonderful essay on Acts 15:36 at [*https://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/pract1.txt*](https://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/pract1.txt)

Harry Boer, *That My House May Be Filled* (Eerdmans, 1957)



Table

Description automatically generated

# 5 Practices of a Missional Church

### Tim Keller at [*https://brave.is/5-practices-of-a-missional-church-tim-keller/*](https://brave.is/5-practices-of-a-missional-church-tim-keller/)

In the West, for nearly a thousand years, the relationship of European Christian churches to the broader culture was a relationship known as Christendom. The institutions of society “Christianized” people and stigmatized non-Christian belief and behavior.

British missionary, Lesslie Newbigin, went to India [in 1936]. When he returned to England, some thirty years later, he discovered that the Western church now found itself in a non-Christian society, but it had not adapted to its new situation. While most traditional evangelical churches can win the temperamentally conventional and conservative to Christ, American author Michael Wolff notes that this market is shrinking. If evangelical churches settle the decline in numbers, with the remaining Christian body not becoming missional, they will decline and die. This has instituted an even greater need for “missional” churches, which adopt the following practices:

**1. Speak in the vernacular**

In Christendom, technical biblical terms are well known inside and outside of the church. In a missional church, however, these terms must be explained.

The missional church:

* avoids “tribal” language, stylized prayer language, and evangelical jargon that seeks to set a spiritual tone.
* avoids “we-they” language, disdainful jokes that mock people of different politics and beliefs
* avoids sentimental, pompous, “inspirational” talk
* avoids talking as if non-believers were not present

**2. Enter and retell the culture’s stories with the Gospel**

In Christendom, it is possible to simply exhort Christianized people to do what they know they should. There is little or no real engagement, listening, or persuasion. Often, along with exhortation, there is a heavy reliance on guilt to motivate behavior change.

In a missional church, preaching and communication always assume skeptics are present and consequently engages their stories. To enter the culture’s stories mean showing sympathy towards and deeply acquainting with literature, music, theatre, and other arts expressing the existing hopes, dreams, heroic narratives and fears. To retell the culture’s stories is to show how only in Christ can we have freedom without slavery and embrace-of-the-other without injustice.

**3. Theologically train laypeople for public life and vocation**

In a missional church, laypeople need theological education to “think Christianly” about everything and work with Christian distinctiveness. They need to know three things: (a) which cultural practices manifest common grace and are to be embraced, (b) which practices are antithetical to the Gospel and must be rejected, and (c) which practices can be adapted/revised.

Christians will have to use the Gospel to demonstrate true, biblical love and tolerance in the public square towards those with whom we deeply differ. This tolerance should equal or exceed that which groups with opposing views show towards Christians. The charge of intolerance is perhaps the main “defeater” of the Gospel in the non-Christian West.

**4. Create Christian community that is countercultural and counterintuitive**

In Christendom, “fellowship” is basically just a set of nurturing relationships, support, and accountability.

In a missional church, however, Christian community must go beyond that to embody a counterculture, showing the world how radically different a Christian society is with regard to sex, money, and power.

* *In sex*. We avoid both the secular society’s idolization of sex and traditional society’s fear of sex. We also exhibit love rather than hostility or fear toward those whose sexual life-patterns are different from ours.
* *In money*. We promote a radically generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space to social justice and the needs of the poor, the immigrant, and the economically and physically weak.
* *In power*. We are committed to power sharing and relationship building among races and classes that are alienated outside of the body of Christ. A missional church must be deeply and practically committed to deeds of compassion and social justice and deeply and practically committed to evangelism and conversion.

**5. Practice Christian unity as much as possible on the local level**

It is very important that we do not spend time bashing and criticizing other kinds of churches. That criticism simply plays into the common “defeater” that Christians are all intolerant. While we align ourselves in denominations that share many of our distinctives, at the local level we should cooperate with, reach out to, and support the other congregations and churches in our area. This will raise many thorny issues, of course, but our bias should be in the direction of cooperation.

# Acts Timeline (ESV Study Bible)

# Table Description automatically generated

Map

Description automatically generated

# The Great Debates (Acts 16:1-10)

Bob Deffinbaugh at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10*](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10)

22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to send men chosen from among them, Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leaders among the brothers, to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. 23 They sent this letter with them: From the apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, greetings! 24 Since we have heard that some have gone out from among us with no orders from us and have confused you, upsetting your minds by what they said, 25 we have unanimously decided to choose men to send to you along with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul, 26 who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ([Acts 15:22-26](javascript:%7b%7d)).[1](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P10_861)

36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s return and visit the brothers in every town where we proclaimed the word of the Lord to see how they are doing.” 37 Barnabas wanted to bring John called Mark along with them too, 38 but Paul insisted that they should not take along this one who had left them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. 39 They had a sharp disagreement, so that they parted company. Barnabas took along Mark and sailed away to Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and set out, commended to the grace of the Lord by the brothers and sisters. 41 He passed through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

1 He also came to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple named Timothy was there, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but whose father was a Greek. 2 The brothers in Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was Greek. 4 As they went through the towns, they passed on the decrees that had been decided on by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the Gentile believers to obey. 5 So the churches were being strengthened in the faith and were increasing in number every day.

6 They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been prevented by the Holy Spirit from speaking the message in the province of Asia. 7 When they came to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to do this, 8 so they passed through Mysia and went down to Troas. 9 A vision appeared to Paul during the night: A Macedonian man was standing there urging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” 10 After Paul saw the vision, we attempted immediately to go over to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them ([Acts 15:36](javascript:%7b%7d)—16:10).

### Introduction[2](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P15_3662)

Having studied the inspired account of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas and their resulting separation, I began to wonder how this incident could have been reported today. For example, suppose that this “**sharp disagreement**” was reported in one of those tabloid magazines you see at the grocery store checkout stand (the kind that report a woman having a 120-pound baby). I can see the headlines reading: **“PAUL GIVES BARNABAS A BLACK EYE – BARNABAS SPLITS!”** Or imagine how this might have been handled in a White House Press Release: “**BARNABAS ACCEPTS CHALLENGING NEW ROLE IN CYPRUS – OLD FRIENDS RELUCTANTLY PART.”** If this were a fairy tale, it would read something like this: “And the two friends made up and lived happily ever after.”

Luke has chosen to characterize the parting of Paul and Barnabas in a different way. He does not sensationalize nor editorialize. He gives a very brief account of the events and then moves on.

I’ve taught this text before on several occasions. As I have prepared for this message, I have had to admit to myself that I am uncomfortable with this text. In fact, I’m uncomfortable with my own interpretation of it in the past. Previously, I have taken the position that neither Paul nor Barnabas was wrong; indeed, both were right. Each was simply exercising his own spiritual gift. But somehow this explanation doesn’t seem to square with all the facts. Let us look first at the text which describes the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, and then I’ll tell you why it makes me uncomfortable.

#### Deadlock [Acts 15:36-41](javascript:%7b%7d)

36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s return and visit the brothers in every town where we proclaimed the word of the Lord to see how they are doing.” 37 Barnabas wanted to bring John called Mark along with them too, 38 but Paul insisted that they should not take along this one who had left them[3](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P21_6135) in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. 39 They had a sharp disagreement, so that they parted company. Barnabas took along Mark and sailed away to Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and set out, commended to the grace of the Lord by the brothers and sisters. 41 He passed through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Judas and Silas, along with Paul and Barnabas, went down to Antioch bearing the letter from the leaders in Jerusalem. Judas and Silas spent some time ministering in Antioch and then returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas stayed on in Antioch for some time. Eventually, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they return to the churches they had planted. It was no mere social call (“**visit**”) that he had in mind, however. It was, so to speak, a pastoral visitation. The word rendered “**visit**” in verse 36 means much more than just to stop by for a friendly visit. Consider a couple of other texts where this same term is employed:

“‘I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you **took care of** me, I was in prison and you visited me’” ([Matthew 25:36](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, because he **has come to help** and has redeemed his people” ([Luke 1:68](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to **care for** orphans and widows in their misfortune and to keep oneself unstained by the world ([James 1:27](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

Paul was concerned for the well-being of those who had come to faith in their previous missionary journey. He knew that the Judaisers would be seeking to persuade these new believers to undergo circumcision and to keep the Law of Moses. He wanted to deliver the letter from the Jerusalem leaders and to minister to these saints. It was much more than a friendly visit. This was a follow-up visitation.

Barnabas was in agreement with this mission, and he was more than willing to accompany Paul on this journey. But he was determined that his cousin,[4](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P28_8287) John Mark, would accompany them. Paul disagreed strongly. He was unwilling to take Mark along when he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone on with them to the work to which they had been called. Paul and Barnabas were on the “front lines,” and this was a very dangerous place to be. Mark had failed the test once, and Paul was not about to take the same risk a second time.

Luke does not provide a lot of detail here, and we should not seek to go beyond the facts he has supplied. But he does inform us that they had a “**sharp disagreement**.” This was not a casual conversation; it was a strong difference of opinion, with irreconcilable differences. And thus the two had to part paths, seemingly never to partner in ministry again. Barnabas took Mark and returned to Cyprus. We are not told that he chose another partner in ministry, nor that he went back to Cyprus to do what Paul and Silas were going to do in Asia Minor. Barnabas simply drops out of sight. Paul chooses Silas to accompany him on his second missionary journey. Silas had ministered with Paul in Antioch ([Acts 15:25-27](javascript:%7b%7d), 32). He was also known as Silvanus.[5](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P30_9451) Paul and Silas were commended to the grace of God by the believers in Antioch and sent on their way.

Leaving Antioch, Paul and Silas first traveled through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. We should note, first of all, that Syria and Cilicia were named in the letter that was sent by the Jerusalem leaders:

They sent this letter with them: From the apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, greetings! ([Acts 15:23](javascript:%7b%7d))

In other words, the Jerusalem leaders had intended all along for this letter to be carried to the churches in Syria and Cilicia, and not just to the church at Antioch. Indeed, this letter would be delivered to all the churches that were planted in the first missionary journey (see [Acts 16:4-5](javascript:%7b%7d)).

We should also note that the first missionary journey did not bring the gospel to Syria and Cilicia. Paul and Barnabas went to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. From Cyprus, they sailed to Asia Minor. It is therefore likely that the churches that Paul and Silas “visited” in Syria and Cilicia were actually planted by Paul after he visited Jerusalem:

When the brothers found out about this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus ([Acts 9:30](javascript:%7b%7d)).

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and get information from him, and I stayed with him fifteen days. 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother. 20 I assure you that, before God, I am not lying about what I am writing to you! 21 Afterward I went to the regions of Syria and Cilicia ([Galatians 1:18-21](javascript:%7b%7d)).

### A Point of Application

Before we press on, let me pause to call a point of application to your attention. Note how quickly Barnabas is replaced by Silas. I would like to suggest that we keep this in mind, especially if we think of ourselves as indispensable. You will recall that Elijah thought of himself as the “**last prophet standing**.”[6](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P39_11492) He was certainly not the only true believer around for there were more than 7,000 who had remained faithful to God ([1 Kings 19:18](javascript:%7b%7d)). How quickly and how easily any of us can be replaced.

I wonder too if our text is not an example of how God, like a skillful coach, places just the right players on the field for what He has in mind. If you watch football, you know that there are specialty teams who train for particular tasks, such as the kickoff team, the punting team, the receiving or run-back team, the field goal team, the two-minute offense squad, and so on. I believe that Barnabas was just the right teammate for Paul on the first missionary journey. I likewise believe that Silas and Timothy (among others, perhaps, including Luke) were the right teammates for Paul on this second missionary journey. For example, when Paul and Silas were arrested and beaten in Philippi, Paul could rightly object that both of them were Roman citizens ([Acts 16:37](javascript:%7b%7d)). We know that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, but was this true of Barnabas, or of John Mark? Perhaps not. Thus, the personnel changes on this second missionary team may very well have been God’s strategic planning, so that the impact of this team could be maximized. Those things which at first appear to be tragic may later become evident as the work of our all-wise God for our good and for His glory ([Romans 8:28](javascript:%7b%7d)).

### What Makes Me Uncomfortable with This Text

I’m about to share some of the reasons why I’m uncomfortable with my former “no-fault interpretation” of this text, but first I would like to explain why Barnabas has become my hero, and thus why I’ve worked so hard to defend him here in this text.

Barnabas truly was a great man. We first met him in [Acts 4](javascript:%7b%7d). There Luke described the newly-born church in the passion of its early days. There were many financial needs among the saints, and those who had material resources entrusted these to the apostles, who distributed them to those in need. Barnabas was named as an example of this early generosity:

36 So Joseph, a Levite who was a native of Cyprus, called by the apostles Barnabas (which is translated “son of encouragement”), 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and placed it at the apostles’ feet ([Acts 4:36-37](javascript:%7b%7d)).

We do not hear of Barnabas again in Acts until chapter 9. Saul has just been dramatically converted as a result of his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. When the Jews sought to kill Saul, he fled to Jerusalem, where he attempted to meet with other Christians. No one wanted to believe that Saul was now a Christian, and so they refused to meet with him. It was Barnabas who came to Saul’s rescue, personally vouching for him. It was thanks to Barnabas that Saul eventually enjoyed fellowship with the Jerusalem saints ([Acts 9:26-28](javascript:%7b%7d)).

As a result of Stephen’s stoning and the persecution that followed, some believers fled from Jerusalem and preached the gospel to Gentiles in Antioch:

19 Now those who had been scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the message to no one but Jews. 20 But there were some men from Cyprus and Cyrene among them who came to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks too, proclaiming the good news of the Lord Jesus. 21 The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord ([Acts 11:19-21](javascript:%7b%7d)).

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that a Gentile church had been planted in Antioch, they recognized their responsibility to strengthen and establish this work. And who would they send? Barnabas was their choice. It is not long before Barnabas heads out to search for Saul, and to bring him to Antioch where he would help strengthen the believers ([Acts 11:25-26](javascript:%7b%7d)). And when Agabus the prophet came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, he warned that a severe famine would soon come all over the world. The saints at Antioch took up a collection for the needy saints in Judea and sent these funds to the Judea, choosing Barnabas and Saul to deliver it to the church ([Acts 11:27-30](javascript:%7b%7d)).

It was “**Barnabas and Saul**” who were set apart by the Spirit and sent out by the church at Antioch to evangelize the Gentiles ([Acts 13:1-4](javascript:%7b%7d)). Clearly, Barnabas was viewed as the leader of this missionary team, when they were sent out by the church.[7](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P50_15887) But when they reached Paphos and encountered the opposition of Elymas (also known as Bar-Jesus), Paul took the initiative in rebuking this Jewish adversary, pronouncing a temporary spell of blindness upon him ([Acts 13:9-11](javascript:%7b%7d)). From this point on, it is “**Paul and his companions**” ([Acts 13:13](javascript:%7b%7d)) or “**Paul and Barnabas**” ([Acts 13:42, 46](javascript:%7b%7d)). Leadership has shifted from Barnabas to Paul. The wonder of it all is that Barnabas seems to have graciously received this “reorganization” as from the hand of God. How many men can graciously accept what amounts to a demotion with grace? Barnabas was one of those men. He is truly one of the great men of the New Testament.

Having said this, I find myself uneasy after reading Luke’s account of the split-up of Paul and Barnabas in our text. In spite of all the supporting evidence that I set forth in my last exposition of this text,[8](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P52_16855) I find that I cannot even convince myself that this break-up was a no-fault separation. Let me share some of the aspects of this brief account[9](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P53_17045) which trouble me.

### Troubling Matters and Some Answers

*(1) The break-up of Paul and Barnabas is decribed in juxtaposition with the argument that precipitated the Jerusalem Council.*There were strongly divergent opinions voiced concerning the salvation of Gentiles. As a result of the teaching of some, the gospel itself was under siege; the decision of this council in Jerusalem was monumental. Many people were involved in this debate, but when the dust settled, the leaders in Jerusalem reached a unanimous decision ([Acts 15:25](javascript:%7b%7d)): salvation (for Jew or Gentile) was by grace through faith, apart from works ([Acts 15:10-11](javascript:%7b%7d)). No Gentile need be circumcised, nor should he be compelled to keep the Old Testament Law. Thus the “great debate” was settled truthfully, peacefully, and with unity. The debate between Paul and Barnabas does not end on such an upbeat note. They do not come to one mind on the issue of taking John Mark along on their second missionary journey. And so it is that we have a debate of great importance being settled nicely, and another debate (which isn’t a matter of fundamental doctrine) which is never really settled, but instead results in two men going their own separate ways. When a nice, neat solution is followed by a messy solution, we don’t tend to feel good about it.

*(2) Paul’s objection to taking John Mark along on their second missionary journey was that he had abandoned them on the first missionary journey (*[*Acts 15:38*](javascript:%7b%7d)*). Now, it looks as though Barnabas has left his responsibilities prematurely, before his mission is finished.* The decision of the Jerusalem Council was officially recorded in the letter that was written to the churches in “**Antioch and Syria and Cilicia**” ([Acts 15:23](javascript:%7b%7d)). In this letter, they commended Barnabas and Paul, along with Judas and Silas ([Acts 15:25-27](javascript:%7b%7d)). Judas and Silas were sent back to Jerusalem from Antioch ([Acts 15:33](javascript:%7b%7d)). One would have expected both Paul and Barnabas to continue on to the churches in Syria and Cilicia,[10](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P57_19230) but only Paul does so ([Acts 15:40-41](javascript:%7b%7d)).It seems as though Barnabas has abandoned his post (not unlike Mark) by not finishing his task. Paul quickly replaced Barnabas with Silas and shortly thereafter chose Timothy to fill the place of John Mark. Barnabas took only John Mark. There was no real “team” that went to Cyprus. We don’t hear of Barnabas again. We don’t know what ministry he had in Cyprus. He just disappears. The church at Antioch (in which Barnabas had such a prominent leadership role) commended Paul and Silas to the grace of God as they set out, but no such commendation is mentioned with regard to Barnabas. One is tempted to wonder whether Barnabas was more devoted to his cousin Mark than he was to the new believers in Asia Minor.

All in all, one does not come away feeling good about the outcome of this strong disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, while one does feel good about the outcome of the strong disagreement that precipitated the Jerusalem Council.

*So what is the solution?* My problem (of feeling uneasy, and wanting to justify Barnabas) was not with the text, but with me. I have tended to idolize these two great men. I found it difficult to come to terms with the fact that every leader has flaws. We dare not idolize any man, whether that man be Moses, David, Solomon, Peter, Barnabas, or Paul. We are to imitate godly men and women to the degree that they follow Christ.[11](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P60_20785) When we idolize men, we either deny their flaws or overlook them, and we turn our eyes from God to men. To idolize men is to make them idols, taking the place of God. The fact is that no one should be idolized, because no one but God is perfect; no one follows Christ perfectly. Peter and Barnabas had to be publicly rebuked because of their hypocrisy in dealing with the Gentiles ([Galatians 2:11-21](javascript:%7b%7d)). Paul was given a “**thorn in the flesh**” to keep him from exalting himself ([2 Corinthians 12:1-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

*Our text (and any other Scripture passage) is not about the greatness of men, but rather it is about the greatness of our God.* We are not to glory in men, but to glory in God:

26 Think about the circumstances of your call, brothers and sisters. Not many were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were born to a privileged position. 27 But God chose what the world thinks foolish to shame the wise, and God chose what the world thinks weak to shame the strong. 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, what is regarded as nothing, to set aside what is regarded as something, 29 so that no one can boast in his presence. 30 He is the reason you have a relationship with Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, “***Let the one who boasts****,* ***boast in the Lord***” ([1 Corinthians 1:26-31](javascript:%7b%7d)).

*Our text is not about the greatness of men, but about the grace of God*. In the past, I sought to excuse Barnabas for departing by giving him the credit for Mark’s restoration. I pointed to these words of Paul:

Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is a great help to me in ministry ([2 Timothy 4:11](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Am I suggesting that Barnabas played no role in the restoration of John Mark? Not at all! But what I am saying is that ultimately the restoration of John Mark is due to the grace of God, and not to the greatness of Barnabas.

We are far too man-centered. We find men that we idolize, and then we seek to be just like them. They write books about how they found the key to success, and then we seek to do our ministry just like they have done theirs. We look for men to mentor us and to give us inspiration and leadership. God does use others in our lives, but we cross the line when we are more dependent on men than we are on God, and when we give the glory to men rather than to God.

One way that we can tell whether we idolize men or not is the degree to which we are devastated by the failure of those we respect and admire. All of us should be disappointed and grieved when a Christian leader fails or falls, but we should not be completely surprised. I have served as an elder in a local church for nearly 30 years, and I can tell you that I have made some foolish mistakes. I can tell you that the elders have collectively made mistakes. And even when we have done the right thing, we have never done it perfectly. We are mere men, and thus we are not perfect. We live in an imperfect world which suffers and groans, waiting for that day when the perfect will come ([Romans 8:18-25](javascript:%7b%7d); [1 Corinthians 13:9-12](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Within the confines of the evangelical faith, there is no denomination that is perfect, that has it all right. There is no theological system (not even my own) that is without its flaws and weaknesses (even if we don’t see or acknowledge them). No local church gets everything right. This is why true believers dare not isolate themselves, but must maintain unity and fellowship, because the strengths of others shore up our weaknesses, and our strengths shore up the weaknesses of others. We dare not be autonomous, attempting to live out our faith in isolation from the body of Christ. Our weaknesses should cause us to depend upon others in the body, rather than to depend only on ourselves.

I agonized because the first argument in [Acts 15](javascript:%7b%7d) (the Jerusalem Council) ended so well, while the second argument (between Paul and Barnabas) did not. *And then I realized a very important reason why the argument between Paul and Barnabas follows the decision of the Jerusalem Council.* The Jerusalem Council concluded that Jews and Gentiles alike are saved by grace, through faith, and not of works. If men were to be saved by Law-keeping, they would have to live perfectly, and that is impossible (see [Acts 13:38-39; 15:10-11](javascript:%7b%7d)). If we are saved by grace, through faith, and not by works, then we don’t have to be perfect. We trust in the Perfect Savior and His sacrifice on the cross of Calvary. And even after we are saved, we don’t have to be perfect. Indeed, we cannot be perfect. We still struggle with the flesh, and our flesh is sometimes overcome by sin ([Romans 7](javascript:%7b%7d); see also [1 John 1:8-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Just as we are saved by grace, through faith, so we serve by grace through faith:

6 Therefore, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and firm in your faith just as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness ([Colossians 2:6-7](javascript:%7b%7d); see also [2 Corinthians 5:7](javascript:%7b%7d)).

We who could not merit salvation by Law-keeping cannot be sanctified by Law-keeping either. We are sanctified on the same grounds that we were saved.

2 The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? 3 Are you so foolish? Although you began with the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by human effort? ([Galatians 3:2-3](javascript:%7b%7d))

Having just read the verdict of the Jerusalem Council – that salvation is by faith, apart from works – why would I expect God’s servants (even giants like Barnabas, Peter, Paul, and John Mark) to live their lives perfectly? This is not an excuse to wallow in sin, or to be sloppy about obeying our Lord. But it does inform us that there are no perfect saints (in the sense that they never fail, never get angry, never think an evil thought, never make a bad decision, never deal harshly with someone).

Leaders don’t have to be perfect in order for us to follow them. Christians don’t have to be perfect for God to use them. The Book of Acts is about the greatness of God, about the sovereignty of God in salvation ([Acts 13:48; 16:14](javascript:%7b%7d)), sanctification ([Philippians 1:6](javascript:%7b%7d)), and evangelization. The degree to which the Great Commission is realized in Acts is not to be explained by giving men credit for doing everything right; *the success of the gospel is to be explained by the sovereignty of God,* who causes even the opposition of unbelievers and the failures of the saints to achieve His foreordained purposes. Acts is not about great men, but about mere men who have been empowered and used by a great God to do great things. I need not ignore, deny, or gloss over the failures of men, even apostles, to assure myself that God’s purposes will be accomplished. His purposes are accomplished through imperfect human instruments. Our weaknesses are designed to cause us to lean more heavily upon God, rather than to trust in our own strength:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that the extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us ([2 Corinthians 4:7](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Therefore, so that I would not become arrogant, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to trouble me - so that I would not become arrogant. 8 I asked the Lord three times about this, that it would depart from me. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” So then, I will boast most gladly about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may reside in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, with insults, with troubles, with persecutions and difficulties for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong ([2 Corinthians 12:7](javascript:%7b%7d)b-10).

#### Galatia Revisited [Acts 16:1-5](javascript:%7b%7d)

1 He also came to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple named Timothy was there, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but whose father was a Greek. 2 The brothers in Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was Greek. 4 As they went through the towns, they passed on the decrees that had been decided on by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the Gentile believers to obey. 5 So the churches were being strengthened in the faith and were increasing in number every day.

Luke tells us that Paul and Silas traveled from Derbe to Lystra (verse 1), but in [Acts 14](javascript:%7b%7d), they traveled from Lystra to Derbe ([Acts 14:8-20](javascript:%7b%7d)). The explanation is clear when one looks at a map of Paul’s first and second missionary journeys. On the first journey, they first sailed to Cyprus, and then sailed north from Cyprus to Asia Minor, coming to Perga. From here, they traveled south to Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, and finally Derbe. They then retraced their steps to Perga, and finally sailed from Attalia to Syrian Antioch. On the second missionary journey, they traveled from Antioch in Syria to Asia Minor by land, traveling north. And thus they came to these cities in reverse order.

Two things are prominent in verses 1-5 of chapter 16. First, we have Luke’s report of how Paul chose Timothy to accompany him (verses 1-3). Second, we have a brief report about the delivery of the letter from the Jerusalem leaders, and its impact on the Galatian churches (verses 4-5).

It is hard to think of the selection of Timothy as anything but a replacement for John Mark (just as Silas was a replacement for Barnabas). I find it most interesting that Mark’s replacement is said to have come from the city of Lystra, and that he was highly recommended by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. Lystra, you will recall, is the city where Paul was stoned and left for dead ([Acts 14:19-20](javascript:%7b%7d)). I wonder if Timothy was one of those surrounding Paul’s body when he was laying there. My point in this is that Timothy lived in a very dangerous place, and yet his testimony was highly respected by the Christians who knew him and his testimony in that dangerous place. While John Mark was a young man who bailed out before they even reached Lystra, Timothy was a young man who emerged in the midst of opposition and danger. Here was the kind of young man whom Paul could trust when things got rough.

Our text is the commencement of a long and very close relationship between Paul and Timothy. Several times, Paul speaks of Timothy as “**his son**” in the faith.[12](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P84_31387) Just as there is a bond between a child and the mother who bore it through painful labor, so there seems to have been a bond between Timothy and Paul, who was stoned in the very city where Timothy lived. Timothy was one of those very rare folks who shared the same vision for ministry as Paul:

19 Now I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be encouraged by hearing news about you. 20 For there is no one here like him who will readily demonstrate his deep concern for you. 21 Others are busy with their own concerns, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But you know his qualifications, that like a son working with his father, he served with me in advancing the gospel ([Philippians 2:19-22](javascript:%7b%7d)).

What an encouragement this young man must have been to Paul, his spiritual father in the faith.

The question in the minds of most is not Timothy’s qualifications to serve, but why Paul had him circumcised. This is a particularly glaring problem in light of the decision of the Jerusalem Council and the events that surrounded it:

1 Then after fourteen years I went up to Jerusalem again with Barnabas, taking Titus along too. 2 I went there because of a revelation and presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did so only in a private meeting with the influential people, to make sure that I was not running - or had not run - in vain. 3 Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, although he was a Greek. 4 Now this matter arose because of the false brothers with false pretenses who slipped in unnoticed to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, to make us slaves. 5 But we did not surrender to them even for a moment, in order that the truth of the gospel would remain with you ([Galatians 2:1-5](javascript:%7b%7d)).

There were those who were teaching the believers that in order for a Gentile to be saved they must, like a Jew, be circumcised and then keep the Law of Moses ([Acts 15:1, 5](javascript:%7b%7d)). When Paul went to Jerusalem, he took Barnabas and Titus along with him. The Judaisers insisted that Titus must be circumcised because he was a Greek. Paul absolutely refused because it would compromise the gospel. It was the gospel that was at stake here, and Paul would not allow it to be perverted into a system of works, rather than grace.

Why then would Paul soon thereafter circumcise Timothy? Was Paul compromising the gospel in doing so? Not at all! Titus was a Gentile, and everyone knew it. Timothy was the son of a Jewish mother, but his father was a Greek. Circumcising Timothy identified him as a Jew. As such, he could accompany Paul wherever he went. Circumcision did not compromise the gospel, because no Jews were demanding that he be circumcised. No one was insisting that he had to be circumcised in order to be saved. Circumcision was Timothy’s identification with the faith of his mother, and this enabled him to minister to the Jews more effectively:

19 For since I am free from all I can make myself a slave to all, in order to gain even more people. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew to gain the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) to gain those under the law. 21 To those free from the law I became like one free from the law (though I am not free from God’s law but under the law of Christ) to gain those free from the law. 22 To the weak I became weak in order to gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that by all means I may save some. 23 I do all these things because of the gospel, so that I can be a participant in it ([1 Corinthians 9:19-23](javascript:%7b%7d)).

It was Paul who wanted Timothy to be circumcised in order to minister more effectively, not some Jewish false brethren who were demanding that he be circumcised in order to be saved. Timothy was not really a Gentile either, and these factors made all the difference in the world. The gospel was therefore not compromised, but rather it was promoted by Timothy’s circumcision.

As this missionary team passed through the cities of Galatia, cities that had heard the gospel on the first missionary journey, they delivered the decrees which had been determined by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. In this way, the churches were freed from the burden the Judaisers sought to impose upon new Gentile converts. And thus the churches were being strengthened in the faith and were growing daily in number. Grace not only gives life to those who are dead in their sins, it produces growth in those who have been saved. Those who are saved by faith are to walk by faith, and thus to grow in their relationship with God through Christ.

#### The Macedonian Call [Acts 16:6-10](javascript:%7b%7d)

6 They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been prevented by the Holy Spirit from speaking the message in the province of Asia. 7 When they came to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to do this, 8 so they passed through Mysia and went down to Troas. 9 A vision appeared to Paul during the night: A Macedonian man was standing there urging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” 10 After Paul saw the vision, we attempted immediately to go over to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them ([Acts 16:6-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

As initially proposed by Paul, their mission had been fulfilled:

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s return and visit the brothers in every town where we proclaimed the word of the Lord to see how they are doing” ([Acts 15:36](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Paul, Silas, and Timothy have visited the Galatian churches and have delivered the decrees from the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem. They have no doubt taught these churches additional truths they needed to know. But having completed this part of this journey, they sought to press on to preach the gospel elsewhere.

The second missionary journey is something like a two-stage rocket launching. The first stage gets the rocket off the ground and into the air. Then this stage is jettisoned and the second stage is ignited, taking it much farther into space. So it was with this missionary journey. The first stage took Paul and his companions back to the churches that had been planted earlier. Having completed this “stage” of the mission, it is time for the second “stage” to be launched. The ways in which God guided them to the “second stage” of their mission are both interesting and informative.

We would like to have been told a great deal more than Luke has included in his account. I believe that Luke’s report is all that we need to know, and that additional information may even have proven to be counter-productive. God first used “closed doors” to guide these missionaries. In some unspecified way, the Holy Spirit prevented them from preaching in Asia. How we would love to know the means the Spirit employed to make this clear to Paul and the others. The problem is that we would probably expect God to guide us in the same way. The important thing is that Paul and his associates recognized this closed door as God’s guidance. For whatever reason, they were not to preach the gospel in Asia on this trip.

Having been prevented from preaching the gospel in Asia, they ventured on to Mysia, but they were prevented from proceeding on to Bithynia. Once again the “**Spirit of Jesus**” would not allow them to do so. Since God closed these doors, the missionaries made their way to Troas on the coast of the Aegean Sea. This is something like Moses and the Israelites on the shores of the Red Sea, wondering where they can go.

This was a critical point in this second missionary journey. God had prevented them from preaching in Asia and Bithynia, but He has not yet informed them as to where they are to preach. During the night, Paul receives a vision which we have come to know as the “Macedonian Vision”:

9 A vision appeared to Paul during the night: A Macedonian man was standing there urging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” 10 After Paul saw the vision, **we** attempted immediately to go over to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them ([Acts 16:9-10](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

The vision came to Paul in the night. He saw a man urging him to “**Come over to Macedonia and help us!**” The entire group recognized this as divine guidance and immediately began seeking to go over to Macedonia to preach the gospel.

There is a subtle, but informative, clue to be found in verse 10: “**After Paul saw the vision, *we* attempted immediately to go over to Macedonia. . . .**” Suddenly Luke’s account shifts from the third person (“**they**”) to the first person (“**we**”).[13](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P106_40096) Luke seems to have joined these missionaries in Troas. He will soon disappear, only to reappear with Paul in [Acts 20:6](javascript:%7b%7d). At such times, Luke is reporting from personal experience.

### Conclusion

I would like to conclude by considering what our text has to teach us about divine guidance. There are those who believe that God must guide His children by continually revealing (in a supernatural way) what they should do at any moment. If this were true, one would expect that it would be taught in the Book of Acts. After all, this is the book in which the Holy Spirit is more prominent than almost any other book of the Bible. This is the book where signs and wonders are as frequent as they are in the Gospels. Should we not expect God to guide His followers in some very dramatic and spectacular ways?

In addition to highlighting the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the church, another prominent theme in the Book of Acts is the sovereignty of God in history and in the church. Nothing is outside of God’s control. We see this throughout the Book of Acts. The theme of God’s sovereignty, combined with the prominence of the Holy Spirit, might lead us to expect almost constant supernatural guidance. But this is not really the case.

It would be safe to say that God does guide in supernatural and spectacular ways – occasionally. But this is hardly the norm in the Book of Acts. Let us consider how God has guided up to this point.

God revealed His will to His church in Acts chapter 1:

6 So when they had gathered together, they began to ask him, “Lord, is this the time when you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” 7 He told them, “You are not permitted to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and **you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth**” ([Acts 1:6-8](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

God’s will was for the gospel to be proclaimed, in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the remotest parts of the earth. When we reach the end of the Book of Acts, we will see that this was partially achieved to one degree or another. How this comes to pass is a whole different story.

The Holy Spirit came upon the church at Pentecost, and through the preaching of Peter, many came to faith ([Acts 2](javascript:%7b%7d)). The church in Jerusalem continued to grow, despite considerable opposition and a number of obstacles. When Ananias and Sapphira lied about their gift to the church, both were divinely disciplined, and although the unbelievers in Jerusalem were reluctant to associate themselves with the church, they did hold Christians in high regard, and many were being saved ([Acts 5:11-14](javascript:%7b%7d)).

When some of their widows were being overlooked, the apostles determined that seven men of great character should be appointed to oversee this ministry. They did so in order that they (the apostles) might not be hindered from their primary ministry of “**prayer and the ministry of the word**” ([Acts 6:2-4](javascript:%7b%7d)). The church did select seven good men, but the irony was that God used two of these men (Stephen and Philip) to have a profound evangelistic impact – Stephen by his death and Philip by his life and ministry. Stephen’s death precipitated a great outbreak of persecution against the church, and this caused the saints in Jerusalem to scatter abroad, taking the good news of the gospel with them ([Acts 8:1-4; 11:19](javascript:%7b%7d)ff.). Philip took the gospel to Samaria, and to the Ethiopian eunuch ([Acts 8:5-40](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Up to this point in Acts, Luke’s account contains only one report of direct, supernatural guidance. This was when the Spirit guided Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, resulting in his salvation. Other than this, God guided His followers more by providence than by direct revelation. The conversion of Saul would change the course of world missions, and this was the result of a personal encounter with the risen Lord ([Acts 9:1-19](javascript:%7b%7d)). Another instance of direct divine guidance is reported in [Acts 10](javascript:%7b%7d). Here, Peter requires a dramatic revelation to convince him that he should go to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, and preach the gospel ([Acts 10:9-20](javascript:%7b%7d)). Another divine revelation was required to convince Cornelius to send for Peter to preach the gospel in his home ([Acts 9:1-8](javascript:%7b%7d)). The result was not only the conversion of Cornelius and his guests, but the realization on the part of Peter’s Jewish colleagues that God intended to save Gentiles as well as Jews (see [Acts 11:18](javascript:%7b%7d)). God spoke to Peter, but through Peter, He also spoke to the church.

In the latter part of [Acts 11](javascript:%7b%7d), God worked through an unnamed and unknown (to the reader) group of Jews who fled from Jerusalem, but who preached to gospel to Gentiles as well as to Jews. Thus a church was founded in Antioch, and this church would be the hub of the missionary movement that was about to be born. The church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to minister to this new church at Antioch. Barnabas promptly located Saul and brought him to minister at Antioch with him. This ministry was the beginning of something very significant in the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

God guides from behind the scenes in [Acts 12](javascript:%7b%7d). For His own reasons, God allowed Herod to execute James, one of our Lord’s inner three. He fully intended to cater to the Jews by executing Peter, but a divine deliverance prevented that. And by the end of chapter 12, Herod is no longer the one who takes life, but is the one whose life is taken, because he accepted the praise of men as though he were a god. I believe that the death of Herod changed the course of the history of the church, for if he had been allowed to live and to continue executing the leaders of the church, things would have been much different. God was guiding, but His hand was not readily apparent (except to the reader of Acts).

Now, in [Acts 13](javascript:%7b%7d), God directs the church in Antioch to set Barnabas and Saul apart for “the work to which He had called them” ([Acts 13:1-2](javascript:%7b%7d)). This guidance did not come to Barnabas, or to Paul, but through the Spirit to the church. There was no need to specify what “the work to which they were called” might be. Their ministry up to this point had made this apparent. It would appear that God did not directly reveal every place that Barnabas and Paul would preach the gospel. Sometimes the next course of action was evident by the opposition they faced. Sometimes God providentially directed their course, as when Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed and went their separate ways ([Acts 15:36-41](javascript:%7b%7d)). Sometimes God guided by closing doors to ministry ([Acts 16:6-7](javascript:%7b%7d)). And then there were the rare occasions when God spoke directly (that is, through a vision) to reveal where they should go.

*My point is that we should look for divine guidance from a variety of indicators.* First and foremost, we should be guided by the Word of God. The Great Commission ([Matthew 28:18-20](javascript:%7b%7d); [Acts 1:8](javascript:%7b%7d)) is a very clear revelation of God’s will. Sometimes circumstances (open and closed doors) will indicate the path or course of action we should take. Sometimes God guides through the painful events of our lives, as when He guided Paul to take Silas as a partner and Timothy as his helper. The fact is that when all is said and done, God’s will is accomplished, in a way that glorifies Him and not men. The good news for Christians is that even though men fail, God’s purposes and promises are always fulfilled.

It is with great sadness that I read our text and see Paul and Barnabas parting ways. But it is with great joy and confidence that I see how God used this unpleasant parting to achieve His gracious purposes. To God be the glory!

[1](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P10_862) Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible. The NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION, also known as THE NET BIBLE, is a completely new translation of the Bible, not a revision or an update of a previous English version. It was completed by more than twenty biblical scholars who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. The translation project originally started as an attempt to provide an electronic version of a modern translation for electronic distribution over the Internet and on CD (compact disk). Anyone anywhere in the world with an Internet connection will be able to use and print out the NET Bible without cost for personal study. In addition, anyone who wants to share the Bible with others can print unlimited copies and give them away free to others. It is available on the Internet at: [www.netbible.org](http://www.netbible.org).

[2](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P15_3663) Copyright © 2006 by Community Bible Chapel, 418 E. Main Street, Richardson, TX 75081. This is the edited manuscript of Lesson 22 in the *Studies in the Book of Acts* series prepared by Robert L. Deffinbaugh on April 30, 2006. Anyone is at liberty to use this lesson for educational purposes only, with or without credit. The Chapel believes the material presented herein to be true to the teaching of Scripture, and desires to further, not restrict, its potential use as an aid in the study of God’s Word. The publication of this material is a grace ministry of Community Bible Chapel.

[3](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P21_6136) I believe that “**left them**” is too weak an expression here. John Mark “deserted” them in Pamphylia. The word that is used here is the root from which the term apostasy is derived.

[4](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P28_8288) [Colossians 4:10](javascript:%7b%7d).

[5](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P30_9452) [2 Corinthians 1:19](javascript:%7b%7d); [1 Thessalonians 1:1](javascript:%7b%7d); [2 Thessalonians 1:1](javascript:%7b%7d); [1 Peter 5:12](javascript:%7b%7d).

[6](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P39_11493) [1 Kings 19:10, 14](javascript:%7b%7d).

[7](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P50_15888) I deduce this from the word order and by the names employed (“**Barnabas . . . and Saul**”).

[8](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P52_16856) [/seriespage/when-division-becomes-multiplication-acts-153682111610](https://bible.org/seriespage/when-division-becomes-multiplication-acts-153682111610)

[9](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P53_17046) I should point out that Luke keeps his account brief. He does not seek to make anyone look bad, but neither does he “gild the lily” to make the situation look better than it was.

[10](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P57_19231) And, from there, to go on to the churches in Asia Minor that had been founded in the first missionary journey (see [Acts 16:1-5](javascript:%7b%7d)).

[11](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P60_20786) See [1 Corinthians 4:16](javascript:%7b%7d): 11:1; [Ephesians 5:1](javascript:%7b%7d); [1 Thessalonians 1:6](javascript:%7b%7d); [Hebrews 13:7](javascript:%7b%7d).

[12](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P84_31388) [1 Timothy 1:18](javascript:%7b%7d); [2 Timothy 1:2; 2:1](javascript:%7b%7d).

[13](https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10" \l "P106_40097) See “**we**” in verses 11, 12, and 13, “**us**” in verse 17.

Self-Examination

by

J. C. Ryle

(1816-1900)

"Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached

the word of the Lord and see how they are doing" (Acts 15:36).

The text which heads this page contains a proposal which the Apostle Paul

made to Barnabas after their first missionary journey. He proposed to

revisit the Churches they had founded, and to see how the were getting

along. Were their members continuing steadfast in the faith? Were they

growing in grace? Were they going forward, or standing still? Were they

prospering, or falling away? "Let us go back and visit the brothers in

all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are

doing."

This was a wise and useful proposal. Let us lay it to heart, and apply

it to ourselves today. Let us search our ways, and find out how matters

stand between ourselves and God. Let us "see how we are doing?" I ask

every reader of this volume to begin its perusal by joining me in self-

examination. If ever self-examination about religion was needed, it is

needed today.

We live in an age of unusual spiritual privileges. Since the world began

there never was such an opportunity for a man's soul to be saved as there

is in England at this time. There never were so many signs of religion

in the land, so many sermons preached, so many services held in churches

and chapels, so many Bibles sold, so many religious books and tracts

printed, so many Societies for evangelizing mankind supported, so much

outward respect paid to Christianity. Things are done everywhere now-a-

days which a hundred years ago would have been thought impossible.

Pastors support the boldest and most aggressive efforts to reach the

unconverted. Clergy of the most formal and structured denominations

advocate special missions, and vie with the Evangelical brethren in

proclaiming that going to church on Sunday is not enough to take a man to

heaven.

In short, there is a stir about religion now-a-days to which there has

been nothing like since England was a nation, and which the cleverest

skeptics and agnostics cannot deny. If Romaine, and Venn, and Berridge,

and Rowlands, and Grimshaw, and Hervey, had been told that such things

would come to pass about a century after their deaths, they would have

been tempted to say, with the Samaritan nobleman, "Look, even if the LORD

should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?" (2 Kings

7:19). But the Lord has opened the floodgates of heaven. There is more

taught now-a-days in England of the real Gospel, and of the way of

salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, in one week, than there was in a year

in Romaine's time. Surely I have a right to say that we live in an age

of spiritual privileges. But are we any better for it? In an age like

this it is well to ask, "How is it going with our souls?"

We live in an age of special spiritual danger. Never perhaps since the

world began was there such an immense amount of mere outward profession

of religion as there is in the present day. A painfully large proportion

of all the congregations in the land consists of unconverted people, who

know nothing of heart-religion, never come to the Lord's Table, and never

confess Christ in their daily lives. Myriads of those who are always

running after preachers, and crowding to hear special sermons, are

nothing better than empty tubs, and tinkling cymbals, without a bit of

real vital Christianity at home.

It is curious and instructive to observe how history repeats itself, and

how much sameness there is in the human heart in every age. Even in the

Early Church, many persons were found at church for the great Christian

ceremonies, and at the theaters, or even at the temples, for the heathen

spectacles. The ritual of the Church was viewed as a theatrical

spectacle. The sermons were listened to as the display of rhetoricians;

and eloquent preachers were cheered, with clapping of hands, stamping of

feet, waving of handkerchiefs, cries of "Orthodox," "Thirteenth Apostle,"

and such like demonstrations, which such teachers as Chrysostom and

Augustine tried to restrain, that they might persuade their flocks to a

more profitable manner of hearing. Some went to Church for the sermon

only, alleging that they could pray at home. And when the more

attractive parts of the service were over, the great mass of the people

departed without remaining for the Lord's Table.

The parable of the sower is continually receiving most vivid and painful

illustrations. The pathway hearers, the stony-ground hearers, the

thorny-ground hearers abound on every side.

The life of many religious persons, I fear, in this age, is nothing

better than a "continual course of spiritual tasting." They are always

morbidly craving fresh excitement; and they seem to care little what it

is if they only get it. All preaching seems to be the same to them; and

they appear unable to "see differences" so long as they hear what is

clever, have their ears tickled, and sit in a crowd. Worst of all, there

are hundreds of young believers who are so infected with the same love of

excitement, that they actually think it a duty to be always seeking it.

Insensible almost to themselves, they take up a kind of hysterical,

sensational, sentimental Christianity, until they are never content with

the "old paths" and, like the Athenians, are always running after

something new.

To see a calm-minded young believer, who is not stuck up, self confident,

self-conceited, and more ready to teach than learn, but content with a

daily steady effort to grow up into Christ's likeness, and to do Christ's

work quietly and inconspicuously, at home, is really becoming almost a

rarity! They show how little deep root they have, and how little

knowledge of their hearts, by noise, forwardness, readiness to contradict

and set down old Christians, and over-weaning trust in their own fancied

soundness and wisdom! Well will it be for many young professors of this

age if they do not end, after being tossed about for a while, and

"carried to and fro by every wind of doctrine," by joining some petty,

narrow-minded, censorious sect, or embracing some senseless, unreasoning

heresy. Surely, in times like these there is great need for self-

examination. When we look around us, we may well ask, "How is it with

our souls?"

In handling this question, I think the shortest plan will be to suggest a

list of subjects for self-examination, and to get them in order. By so

doing I shall hope to meet the case of every one into whose hands this

volume may fall. I invite every reader of this paper to join me in calm,

searching self-examination, for a few short minutes. I desire to speak

to myself as well as to you. I approach you not as an enemy, but as a

friend. "My heart's desire and prayer to God is that you may be saved"

(Romans 10:1). Bear with me if I say things which at first sight look

harsh and severe. Believe me, he is your best friend who tells you the

most truth.

(1) Let me ask, in the first place, "Do we ever think about our souls at

all?"

Thousands of people, I fear, cannot answer that question satisfactorily.

They never give the subject of religion any place in their thoughts.

From the beginning of the year to the end they are absorbed in the

pursuit of business, pleasure, politics, money, or self-indulgence of

some kind or another. Death, and judgment, and eternity, and heaven, and

hell, and a world to come, are never calmly looked at and considered.

They live on as if they were never going to die, or rise again, or stand

at the bar of God, or receive an eternal sentence! They do not openly

oppose Christianity, for they do not have sufficient reflection about it

to do so; but they eat and drink, and sleep, and get money, and spend

money, as if Christianity was a mere fiction and not a reality.

They are neither Roman Catholics, nor Socinians, nor infidels, nor High

Church, nor Low Church, nor Broad Church. They are just nothing at all,

and do not take the trouble to have opinions. A more senseless and

unreasonable way of living cannot be conceived; but they do not pretend

to reason it out. They simply never think about God, unless frightened

for few minutes by sickness, death in their families, or an accident.

Barring such interruptions, they appear to ignore Christianity

altogether, and hold on to their way cool and undisturbed, as if there

were nothing worth thinking of except this world.

It is hard to imagine a life more unworthy of an immortal creature than

such a life as I have just described, for it reduces a man to the level

of a beast. But it is literally and truly the life of multitudes and as

they pass away their place is taken by multitudes like them. The

picture, no doubt, is horrible, distressing, and revolting but,

unhappily, it is only too true. In every large town, in every market, on

every stock-exchange, in every club, you may see specimens of this class

by the scores--men who think of everything under the sun except the one

thing needful--the salvation of their souls.

Like the Jews of old they do not "consider their ways," they do not

"consider their latter end;" they do not "consider that they do evil"

(Isaiah 1:3; Haggai 1:7; Deuteronomy 32:29; Ecclesiastes 5:1). Like

Gallio they "care for none of these things:" they are not in their way.

(Acts 18:17). If they prosper in the world, and get rich, and succeed in

their line of life, they are praised, and admired by their

contemporaries. Nothing succeeds today like success! But for all this

they cannot live forever. They will have to die and appear before the

bar of God, and be judged; and then what will the end be? When a large

class of this kind exists in our country, no reader need wonder that I

ask whether he belongs to it. If you do, you ought to have a mark set on

your door, as there used to be a mark on a plague-stricken house two

centuries ago, with the words, "Lord have mercy on us," written on it.

Look at the class I have been describing, and then look at your own soul.

(2) Let me ask, in the second place, whether we ever do anything about

our souls?

There are multitudes who think occasionally about Christianity, but

unhappily never get beyond thinking. After a stirring sermon, or after a

funeral, or under the pressure of illness, or on Sunday evening, or when

things go bad in their families, or when they meet some bright example of

a Christian, or when they fall in with some striking, religious book or

tract, they will at the time think a good deal, and even talk a little

about religion in a vague way. But they stop short, as if thinking and

talking were enough to save them. They are always meaning, and

intending, and purposing, and resolving, and wishing, and telling us that

they "know" what is right, and "hope" to be found right in the end, but

they never attain to any action.

There is no actual separation from the world and sin, no real taking up

the cross and following Christ, no positive "doings" in their

Christianity. Their life is spent in playing the part of the son in our

Lord's parable, to whom the father said, "'Go and work today in the

vineyard:' and he answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go" (Matthew

21:30).

They are like those whom Ezekiel describes, who liked his preaching, but

never practiced what he preached: "My people come to you, as they usually

do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them

into practice. . . .Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who

sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for

they hear your words but do not put them into practice" (Ezekiel 33:31-

32).

In a day like this, when hearing and thinking without doing, is so

common, no one can rightly wonder that I press upon men the absolute need

of self-examination. Once more, then, I ask my readers to consider the

question of my text, "How is it with our souls?"

(3) Let me ask, in the third place, whether we are trying to satisfy our

consciences with a mere formal religion?

There are myriads at this moment who are making shipwreck on this rock.

Like the Pharisees of old, they make much ado about the outward part of

Christianity, while the inward and spiritual part is totally neglected.

They are careful to attend all the services of their place of worship,

and are regular at all the church functions. They are never absent from

Communion when the Lord's Supper is administered. Sometimes they are

most strict in observing Lent, and attach great importance to Saints'

days. They are often keen partisans of their own Church, or sect, or

congregation, and ready to contend with any one who does not agree with

them. Yet all this time there is no heart in their religion.

Anyone who knows them intimately can see with half an eye that their

affections are set on things below, and not on things above; and that

they are trying to make up for the want of inward Christianity by an

excessive quantity of outward form. And this formal religion does them

no real good. They are not satisfied. Beginning at the wrong end, by

making the outward things first, they know nothing of inward joy and

peace, and pass their days in a constant struggle, secretly conscious

that there is something wrong, and yet not knowing why. It would be

well, after all, if they do not go on from one stage of formality to

another, until in despair they take a fatal plunge, and fall into Roman

Catholicism! When professing Christians of this kind are so painfully

numerous, no one need wonder if I press upon him the paramount importance

of close self-examination. If you love life, do not be content with the

husk, and shell, and scaffolding of religion. Remember our Savior's

words about the Jewish formalists of His day: "These people honor me with

their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain;

their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Matthew 15:8-9).

It needs something more than going diligently to church, and receiving

the Lord's Supper, to take our souls to heaven. These things are useful

in their way, and God seldom does anything for His church without them.

But let us beware of making shipwreck on the very lighthouse which helps

to show the channel into the harbor. Once more I ask, "How is it with

our souls?"

(4) Let me ask, in the fourth place, whether we have received the

forgiveness of our sins?

Few reasonable persons would think of denying that they are sinners.

Many perhaps would say that they are not as bad as others, and that they

have not been really wicked, and so forth. But few, I repeat, would

pretend to say that they had always lived like angels, and never done, or

said, or thought a wrong thing all their life. In short, all of us must

confess that we are "sinners," and, as sinners, are guilty before God;

and, as guilty, we must be forgiven, or be lost and condemned forever at

the last day. Now it is the glory of the Christian religion that it

provides for us the very forgiveness that we need--full, free, perfect,

eternal, and complete. It is a fundamental belief of the Christian Faith

that we are forgiven.

This forgiveness of sins has been purchased for us by the eternal Son of

God, our Lord Jesus Christ. He has purchased it for us by coming into

the world to be our Savior, and by living, dying, and rising again, as

our Substitute, in our behalf. He has bought it for us at the price of

His own most precious blood, by suffering in our place on the cross, and

making satisfaction to God for our sins. But this forgiveness, great,

and full, and glorious as it is, does not become the property of every

man and woman as a matter of course. It is not a privilege which every

member of a church possesses, merely because they are a member of a

church. It is a thing which each individual must receive for himself by

his own personal faith, grab hold of by faith, appropriate by faith, and

make his own by faith: or else, so far as he is concerned, Christ will

have died in vain. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but

whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on

him" (John 3:36).

No terms can be imagined more simple, and more suitable to man. As good

old Latimer said in speaking of the matter of justification, "It is but

believe and have. It is only faith that is required; and faith is

nothing more than the humble, heartfelt trust of the soul which desires

to be saved. Jesus is able and willing to save; but man must come to

Jesus and believe. All that believe are at once justified and forgiven:

but without believing there is no forgiveness at all.

Now here is exactly the point, I am afraid, because multitudes of our

people who go to church are unsaved sinners, and are in imminent danger

of being lost forever. They know that there is no forgiveness of sin

except in Christ Jesus. They can tell you that there is no Savior for

sinners, no Redeemer, no Mediator, excepting Him who was born of the

Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died, and buried.

But here they stop, and get no further! They never come to the point of

actually laying hold of Christ by faith, and becoming one with Christ and

Christ in them. They can say, He is a Savior, but not my Savior--a

Redeemer, but not my Redeemer--a Priest, but not my Priest--an Advocate,

but not my Advocate: and so they live and die unforgiven! No wonder that

Martin Luther said, "Many are lost because they cannot use possessive

pronouns. When this is the state of many in this day, no one need wonder

that I ask men whether they have received the forgiveness of sins.

An eminent Christian lady once said, in her old age, "The beginning of

eternal life in my soul, was a conversation I had with an old gentleman

who came to visit my father when I was only a little girl. He took me by

the hand one day and said, My dear child, my life is nearly over, and you

will probably live many years after I am gone. But never forget two

things. One is, that there is such a thing as having our sins forgiven

while we live. The other is, that there is such a thing as knowing and

feeling that we are forgiven. I thank God I have never forgotten his

words." How is it with us? Let us not rest till we "know and feel" that

we are forgiven. Once more let us ask, in the matter of forgiveness of

sins, "How is it with our souls?"

(5) Let me ask, in the fifth place, whether we know anything by

experience of conversion to God.

Without conversion there is no salvation.

Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter

the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3).

No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again (John 3:3).

If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to

Christ (Romans 8:9).

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).

We are all by nature so weak, so worldly, so earthly-minded, so inclined

to sin, that without a thorough change we cannot serve God in life, and

could not enjoy Him after death. Just as ducks, as soon as they are

hatched, take naturally to water, so do children, as soon as they can do

anything, take to selfishness, lying, and deceit; and none pray or love

God, unless they are taught. Rich or poor, gentle or simple, we all need

a complete change--a change which the Holy Spirit gives to us. Call it

what you please--new birth, regeneration, renewal, new creation,

quickening, repentance--the thing must be possessed if we are to be

saved: and if we have the thing it will be seen.

Sense of sin and deep hatred of it, faith in Christ and love to Him,

delight in holiness and longing after more of it, love for God's people

and distaste for the things of the world,--these, these are the signs and

evidences which always accompany conversion. Myriads around us, it may

be feared, know nothing about it. They are, in Scripture language, dead,

and asleep, and blind, and unfit for the kingdom of God. Year after

year, perhaps, they go on repeating the words, "I believe in the Holy

Spirit," but they are utterly ignorant of His changing power on the

inward man. Sometimes they flatter themselves they are born again,

because they have been baptized, and go to church, and receive the Lord's

Supper; while they are totally destitute of the marks of the new birth,

as described by John in his first Epistle. And all this time the words

of Scripture are clear and plain, "Unless you change and become like

little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew

18:3).

In times like these, no reader ought to wonder that I press the subject

of conversion on men's souls. No doubt there are plenty of sham

conversions in such a day of religious excitement as this. But a bad

coin is no proof that there is no good money: no, rather it is a sign

that there is some money currency which is valuable, and is worth

imitation. Hypocrites and sham Christians are indirect evidence that

there is such a thing as real grace among men. Let us search our own

hearts then, and see how it is with ourselves. Once more let us ask, in

the matter of conversion, "How is it with us?"

(6) Let me ask, in the sixth place, whether we know anything of

practical Christian holiness?

It is as certain as anything in the Bible that "without holiness no one

will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). It is equally certain that it is the

invariable fruit of saving faith, the real test of regeneration, the only

sound evidence of indwelling grace, the certain consequence of vital

union with Christ.

Holiness is not absolute perfection and freedom from all faults. Nothing

of the kind! The wild words of some who talk of enjoying "unbroken

communion with God for many months, are greatly to be condemned, because

they raise unscriptural expectations in the minds of young believers, and

so do harm. Absolute perfection is for heaven, and not for earth, where

we have a weak body, a wicked world, and a busy devil continually near

our souls. Nor is real Christian holiness ever attained, or maintained,

without a constant fight and struggle. The great Apostle, who said "I

beat my body and make it my slave (1 Corinthians 9:27), would have been

amazed to hear of sanctification without personal effort, and to be told

that believers only need to sit still, and everything will be done for

them!

Yet, weak and imperfect as the holiness of the best saints may be, it is

a real true thing, and has a character about it as unmistakable as light

and salt. It is not a thing which begins and ends with noisy profession:

it will be seen much more than heard. Genuine Scriptural holiness will

make a man do his duty at home, and adorn his doctrine in the little

trials of daily life. It will make a man humble, kind, gentle,

unselfish, good-tempered, considerate of others, loving, meek, and

forgiving. It will not force him to go out of the world, and shut

himself up in a cave, like a hermit. But it will make him do his duty in

that state to which God has called him, on Christian principles, and

after the pattern of Christ.

Such holiness, I know well, is not common. It is a style of practical

Christianity which is painfully rare in these days. But I can find no

other standard of holiness in the Word of God, no other which comes up to

the pictures drawn by our Lord and His Apostles. In an age like this no

reader can wonder if I press this subject also on men's attention. Once

more let us ask--In the matter of holiness, how is it with our souls?

"How are we doing?"

(7) Let me ask, in the seventh place, whether we know anything of

enjoying the means of grace?

When I speak of the means of grace, I have in my mind's eye five

principal things:

The Reading of the Bible

Private Prayer

Public Worship

The Taking of the Lord's Supper

The Rest of the Lord's day.

They are means which God has graciously appointed in order to convey

grace to man's heart by the Holy Spirit, or keep up the spiritual life

after it has begun. As long as the world stands, the state of a man's

soul will always depend greatly on the manner and spirit in which he uses

means of grace. The manner and spirit, I say deliberately and of

purpose. Many people use the means of grace regularly and formally, but

know nothing of enjoying them: they attend to them as a matter of duty,

but without a lot of feeling, interest, or affection. Yet even common

sense might tell us that this formal, mechanical use of holy things is

utterly worthless and unprofitable. Our feeling about them is just one

of the many tests of the state of our souls. How can that man be

thought to love God who reads about Him and His Christ as a mere matter

of duty, content and satisfied if he has just moved his bookmark onward

over so many chapters? How can that man suppose he is ready to meet

Christ who never takes any trouble to pour out his heart to Him in

private as a Friend, and is satisfied with saying over a string of words

every morning and evening, under the name of prayer, scarcely thinking

what he is about? How could that man be happy in heaven forever who

finds Sunday a dull, gloomy, tiresome day--who knows nothing of hearty

prayer and praise, and cares nothing whether he hears truth or error from

the pulpit, or scarcely listens to the sermon? What can be the spiritual

condition of that man whose heart never "burns within him," when he

receives that bread and wine which specially remind us of Christ's death

on the cross, and the atonement for sin?

These inquiries are very serious and important. If means of grace had no

other use, and were not mighty helps toward heaven, they would be useful

in supplying a test of our real state in the sight of God. Tell me what

a man does in the matter of Bible reading and praying, in the matter of

Sunday, public worship, and the Lord's Supper, and I will soon tell you

what he is, and on which road he is traveling. How is it with ourselves?

Once more let us ask--In the matter of means of grace, "How are we

doing?"

(8) Let me ask, in the eighth place, whether we ever try to do any good

in the world?

Our Lord Jesus Christ was continually "going around doing good," while He

was on earth (Acts 10:38). The Apostles, and all the disciples in Bible

times, were always striving to walk in His steps. A Christian who was

content to go to heaven himself and cared not what became of others,

whether they lived happy and died in peace or not, would have been

regarded as a kind of monster in primitive times, who did not have the

Spirit of Christ. Why should we suppose for a moment that a lower

standard will suffice in the present day? Why should fig trees which

bear no fruit be spared in the present day, when in our Lord's time they

were to be cut down because, "why should it use up the soil?" (Luke 13:7).

These are serious inquiries, and demand serious answers.

There is a generation of professing Christians now-a-days, who seem to

know nothing of caring for their neighbors, and are completely swallowed

up in the concerns of number one--that is, their own and their family's.

They eat, and drink, and sleep, and dress, and work, and earn money, and

spend money, year after year; and whether others are happy or miserable,

well or ill, converted or unconverted, traveling towards heaven or toward

hell, appear to be questions about which they are supremely indifferent.

Can this be right? Can it be reconciled with the religion of Him who

spoke the parable of the good Samaritan, and commanded us "Go and do

likewise"? (Luke 10:37). I doubt it completely.

There is much to be done everywhere. There is not a place where there is

not a field for work and an open door for being useful, if any one is

willing to enter it. There is not a Christian who cannot find some good

work to do for others, if he has only a heart to do it. The poorest man

or woman, without a single penny to give, can always show his deep

sympathy to the sick and sorrowful, and by simple good-nature and tender

helpfulness can lessen the misery and increase the comfort of somebody in

this troubled world. But no, the vast majority of professing Christians,

whether rich or poor, faithful Church attendees or not, seem possessed

with a devil of detestable selfishness, and do not know the luxury of

doing good. They can argue by the hour about baptism, and the Lord's

supper, and the forms of worship, and the union of Church and State, and

other dry-bone questions. But all this time they seem to care nothing

for their neighbors. The plain practical point, whether they love

their neighbor, as the Samaritan loved the traveler in the parable, and

can spare any time and trouble to do him good, is a point they never

touch with one of their fingers.

In too many places, both in the city and the country, true love seems

almost dead, both in church and chapel, and wretched denomination spirit

and controversy are the only fruits that Christianity appears able to

produce. In a day like this, no reader should wonder if I press this

plain old subject on his conscience. Do we know anything of genuine

Samaritan love to others? Do we ever try to do any good to any one

beside our own friends and relatives, and our and our own denomination or

cause? Are we living like disciples of Him who always "went about doing

good," and commanded His disciples to take Him for their "example"? (John

13:15). If not, with what face shall we meet Him in the judgment day?

In this matter also, how is it with our souls? Once more I ask, "How are

we doing?"

(9) Let me ask, in the ninth place, whether we know anything of living

the life of habitual communion with Christ?

By "communion," I mean that habit of "abiding in Christ" which our Lord

speaks of, in the fifteenth chapter of John's Gospel, as essential to

Christian fruitfulness (John 15:4-8). Let it be distinctly understood

that union with Christ is one thing, and communion is another. There can

be no communion with the Lord Jesus without union first; but unhappily

there may be union with the Lord Jesus, and afterwards little or no

communion at all. The difference between the two things is the

difference between two distinct steps, but the higher and lower ends of

an inclined plane. Union is the common privilege of all who feel their

sins, and truly repent, and come to Christ by faith, and are accepted,

forgiven, and justified in Him. Too many believers, it may be feared,

never get beyond this stage! Partly from ignorance, partly from

laziness, partly from the fear of man, partly from secret love of the

world, partly from some unmortified besetting sin, they are content with

a little faith, and a little hope, and a little peace, and a little

measure of holiness. And they live on all their lives in this condition,

doubting, weak, hesitant, and bearing fruit only "thirty-fold" to the

very end of their days!

Communion with Christ is the privilege of those who are continually

striving to grow in grace, and faith, and knowledge, and conformity to

the mind of Christ in all things--who "forget what is behind," and "do

not consider themselves yet to have taken hold of it, but "press on

toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward

in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13-14). Union is the bud, but communion

is the flower: union is the baby, but communion is the strong man. He

that has union with Christ does well; but he that enjoys communion with

Him does far better. Both have one life, one hope, one heavenly seed in

their heart--one Lord, one Savior, one Holy Spirit, one eternal home: but

union is not as good as communion! The grand secret of communion with

Christ is to be continually living by faith in the Son of God, and

drawing out of Him every hour the supply that every hour requires. To

me, said Paul, to live is Christ.--I no longer live, but Christ lives in

me (Galatians 2:20; Philippians 1:21).

Communion like this is the secret of the abiding "joy and peace in

believing," which eminent saints like Bradford and Rutherford notoriously

possessed. None were ever more humble, or more deeply convinced of their

own infirmities and corruption. They would have told you that the

seventh chapter of Romans precisely described their own experience. They

would have said continually, "The remembrance of our sins is grievous to

us; the burden of them is intolerable." But they were always looking to

Jesus, and in Him they were always able to rejoice--Communion like this

is the secret of the splendid victories which such men as these won over

sin, the world, and the fear of death. They did not sit still idly,

saying, "I leave it all to Christ to do for me, but, strong in the Lord,

they used the Divine nature He had implanted in them, boldly and

confidently, and were more than conquerors through Him who loved them

(Romans 8:37). Like Paul they would have said, "I can do everything

through Him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:13).

Ignorance of this life of communion is one among many reasons why so many

in this age are prey to formal religions and strange doctrines. Such

errors often spring from imperfect knowledge of Christ, and obscure views

of the life of faith in a risen, living, and interceding Savior.

Is communion with Christ like this a common thing? No! It is very rare

indeed! The greater part of believers seem content with the barest

elementary knowledge of justification by faith, and half-a-dozen other

doctrines, and go doubting, limping, groaning along the way to heaven,

and experience little of the sense of victory or of joy.

The Churches of these latter days are full of weak, powerless, and

uninfluential believers, saved at last, but only as one escaping through

the flames, but never shaking the world, and knowing nothing of an rich

welcome (1 Corinthians 3:15; 2 Peter 1:11). Despondency and Feeble-mind

and Much-afraid, Pilgrim's Progress," reached the celestial city as

really and truly as Valiant-for-the-truth and Greatheart. But they

certainly did not reach it with the same comfort, and did not do a tenth

part of the same good in the world! I fear there are many like them in

these days! When things are like this in the Churches, no reader can

wonder that I inquire how it is with our souls. Once more I ask--In the

matter of communion with Christ, "How are we doing?

(10) Let me ask, in the tenth and last place, whether we know anything

of being ready for Christ's second coming?

That He will come again the second time is as certain as anything in the

Bible. The world has not yet seen the last of Him. As surely as He went

up visibly and in the body on the Mount of Olives before the eyes of His

disciples, so surely will he come again in the clouds of heaven, with

power and great glory (Acts 1:11). He will come to raise the dead, to

change the living, to reward His saints, to punish the wicked, to renew

the earth, and take the curse away--to purify the world, even as He

purified the temple--and to establish a kingdom where sin will have no

place, and holiness will be the universal rule. The doctrines which we

repeat and profess to believe, continually declare that Christ is coming

again.

The early Christians made it a part of their religion to look for His

return. Backward they looked to the cross and the atonement for sin, and

rejoiced in Christ crucified. Upward they looked to Christ at the right

hand of God, and rejoiced in Christ interceding. Forward they looked to

the promised return of their Master, and rejoiced in the thought that

they would see Him again. And we ought to do the same.

What have we really got from Christ? What do we know of Him? What do we

think of Him? Are we living as if we long to see Him again, and love His

appearing? Readiness for that appearing is nothing more than being a

real, consistent Christian. It requires no man to cease from his daily

business. The farmer need not give up his farm, nor the shopkeeper his

counter, nor the doctor his patients, nor the carpenter his hammer and

nails, nor the bricklayer his mortar and trowel. Each and all cannot do

better than be found doing his duty, but doing it as a Christian, and

with a heart packed up and ready to be gone. In the face of truth like

this no reader can feel surprised if I ask, How is it with our souls in

the matter of Christ's second coming?

The world is growing old and running to seed. The vast majority of

Christians seem like the men in the time of Noah and Lot, who were eating

and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, planting and building, up

to the very day when flood and fire came. Those words of our Master are

very solemn and heart-searching,--Remember Lot's wife--"Be careful, or

your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the

anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a

trap (Luke 17:32; 21:34). Once more I ask--In the matter of readiness

for Christ's second coming, "How are we doing?

I end my inquiries here. I might easily add to them; but I trust I have

said enough, at the beginning of this volume, to stir up self-inquiry and

self-examination in many minds. God is my witness that I have said

nothing that I do not feel of paramount importance to my own soul. I

only want to do good to others. Let me now conclude with a few words of

practical application.

(a) Is any reader of this paper asleep and utterly thoughtless about

Christianity?

Oh, awake and sleep no more! Look at the cemeteries. One by one the

people around you are dropping into them, and you must lie there one day.

Look forward to a world to come, and lay your hand on your heart, and

say, if you dare, that you ready to die and meet God. Ah! You are like

one sleeping in a boat drifting down the stream towards the falls of

Niagara! "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your God!--Wake up, O

sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you" (Jonah 1:6;

Ephesians 5:14).

(b) Is any reader of this paper feeling self-condemned, and afraid that

there is no hope for his soul?

Cast aside your fears, and accept the offer of our Lord Jesus Christ to

sinners. Hear Him saying, "Come to me, all you who are weary and

burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). If anyone is

thirsty, let him come to me and drink (John 7:37). Whoever comes to me I

will never drive away (John 6:37).

Do not doubt that these words are for you as well as for anyone else.

Bring all your sins, and unbelief, and sense of guilt, and unfitness, and

doubts, and infirmities--bring all to Christ. This man welcomes sinners,

and He will welcome you (Luke 15:2). Do not stand still, wavering

between two opinions, and waiting for a convenient season. On your feet!

He's calling you. Come to Christ this very day (Mark 10:49).

(c) Is any reader of this paper a professing believer in Christ, but a

believer without much joy and peace and comfort?

Take advice this day. Search your own heart, and see whether the fault

is not entirely your own. Very likely you are sitting at ease, content

with a little faith, and a little repentance, a little grace and a little

sanctification, and unconsciously shrinking back from extremes. You will

never be a very happy Christian at this rate, if you live to the age of

Methuselah. Change your plan, if you love life and would see good days,

without delay. Come out boldly, and act decidedly. Be thorough,

thorough, very through in your Christianity, and set your face fully

towards the sun. Lay aside every weight, and the sin that does so easily

overtakes you. Strive to get nearer to Christ, to abide in Him, to

cleave to Him, and to sit at His feet like Mary, and drink full portions

out of the fountain of life. These things, says John, we write to make

our joy complete (1 John 1:4). If we walk in the light, as He is in the

light, we have fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7).

(d) Is any reader of this paper a believer oppressed with doubts and

fears, on account of his weakness, infirmity, and sense of sin?

Remember the text that says of Jesus, A bruised reed he will not break,

and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out (Matthew 12:20). Take

comfort in the thought that this text is for you. What though your faith

be weak? It is better than no faith at all. The least grain of life is

better than death. Perhaps you are expecting too much in this world.

Earth is not heaven. You are still in the body. Expect little from

self, but much from Christ. Look more to Jesus, and less to self.

(e) Finally, is any reader of this paper sometimes downcast by the

trials he meets with on the way to heaven, bodily trials, family trials,

trials of circumstances, trials from neighbors, and trials from the

world? Look up to a sympathizing Savior at God's right hand, and pour

out your heart before Him. He can be touched with the feelings of your

trials, for He Himself suffered when He was tempted--Are you alone? So

was He. Are you misrepresented and slandered? So was He. Are you

forsaken by friends? So was He. Are you persecuted? So was He. Are

you wearied in body and grieved in spirit? So was He. Yes! He can feel

for you, and He can help as well as feel. Then learn to draw nearer to

Christ. The time is short. Yet in a little while, and all will be over:

we shall soon be with the Lord. There is surely a future hope for you,

and your hope will not be cut off (Proverbs 23:18). You need to

persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive

what he has promised. For in just a very little while, He who is coming

will come and will not delay (Hebrews 10:36-37).

Transcribed and Updated by

Tony Capoccia

Bible Bulletin Board

Internet: www.biblebb.com

Box 314

Columbus, NJ 08022

....online since 1986