

## Virtues of Healthy Churches

In our passage today, Luke records two interesting accounts. We may wonder why he included these in the book of Acts. One involves unresolved conflict between followers of Jesus; the other a situation that seems to be a strong contraction to what the Jerusalem Council determined about the Law in the earlier part of Acts 15. But instead of ignoring these two situations, Luke highlights them and shows how God was at work in the midst of them. As a result, the churches that Paul and his team established became stronger and more fruitful (15:41; 16:5). Why? Because those involved in these situations were resilient and selfless. These virtues are foundational if we are going to be a strong, healthy church, effective in our mission.

### Read Acts 15:36-41

1. What created the conflict that Paul and Barnabas experienced?
2. Do you think one of them was in the wrong? Or is it possible for two people truly following God to have such a sharp disagreement?
3. Steve defined resilience as staying loyal to Jesus in spite of strife. How do Paul and Barnabas model this resilience?

Steve said:

When possible, as far as it depends on us, we live peaceably with one another. But Paul and Barnabas illustrate that it's not always possible. . . therefore you can't always live peaceably with all. Sharp disagreements and separations among committed believers are a reality in the body of Christ. But . . . today's passage also suggests that when such separations occur, we should be resilient; we should be spiritually tough enough to stay loyal to Jesus anyway. Paul and Barnabas were resilient; they each remained loyal to Jesus. They didn't become embittered and disillusioned and give up. They each stayed on mission and continued strengthening the churches that they had established. . . The health of this church (and of the body of Christ) requires resilience, spiritual toughness, when it comes to disagreements and separations with other believers. Our loyalty to Jesus needs to be deeper than our disappointment with other believers. He died for us, therefore how can we not live for him?

4. Have you experienced separation from other believers that has caused you to want to give up?

5. Would you say that your loyalty to Jesus is deeper than your disappointment with other believers? Explain.

**Read Acts 16:1-5**

6. What does Luke tell us about Timothy?
7. After the ruling of the Jerusalem Council that determined that no one is saved by following the law (vv. 15:1-2, 11), why did Paul have Timothy circumcised? Why was it important for the mission?
8. What does this situation reveal about Paul and Timothy?

Steve said:

Without compromising his theology or his conscience, Paul voluntarily sacrificed his freedoms in order to remove barriers to the gospel. That's why he wanted Timothy to be circumcised. This type of selflessness - where we voluntarily lay aside our freedoms for the sake of the gospel - is largely a foreign concept in the church today. That's because we tend to be very committed to our rights and freedoms and those without Christ tend to be an afterthought. To clarify, I'm not talking about other people demanding that you give up your freedoms (Paul would have none of that - see Galatians 2). I'm talking about voluntarily laying aside freedoms out of compassion for others. Paul and Timothy's behavior was driven by compassion. Since they cared so much about the people who needed a relationship with God, they asked the question, "Will this behavior or issue help or hinder these people from hearing the gospel?" If it hindered the gospel - even if they had the freedom to do it - they laid it aside (at least for a time). The health of this church (and of the body of Christ) requires selflessness; at times we need to sacrifice our freedoms for the sake of the gospel.

9. What do you think about this idea of being willing to sacrifice your freedoms for the sake of the gospel?
10. What are ways that you can grow and become more selfless for the sake of the gospel (at work, in your neighborhood, etc.)?