

Acts 15:30–41 — Let Go in Peace

Dismissed vs. Let Go, Prophets and Gift in the Body, No Everyman Ministry, and the Parting of Paul and Barnabas

Scripture Reading: Acts 15:30–41

“So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle: which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation.

“And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them.

“And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; and Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God.”

Dismissed versus Let Go: Two Different Words

The word translated let go in verse 30 — and in verse 33, they were let go in peace — is different from the word dismissed that describes the Sanhedrin sending away the apostles after beating them in Acts 5:40. J.N. Darby’s translation captures this precisely: in Acts 5 where the beaten apostles are sent away, he uses dismissed, with all the legal force of a command to depart. Here, where the brethren at Jerusalem send Judas, Silas, Barnabas, and Paul on their way, he uses let go — allowed to go, released with blessing, like the difference between a direction and a permission.

The contrast is fitting. The spirit of Acts 15 throughout is one of warmth, care, and mutuality. The letter itself was gentle in tone; the sending was gentle in

character. Let go in peace is the right expression for a company that had received the consolation. They were not dismissed; they were released, with the peace of the assembly behind them.

Prophets and Their Gift: Not Apostles, Not Occasion-Only

Verse 32 identifies Judas and Silas as being prophets themselves. This is worth careful attention. Some writers, concentrating on the passage in Ephesians 2:20 about the church being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, conclude simply that apostles and prophets are gone, and leave it there without thinking further. But 1 Corinthians 14 still expects prophets to speak in the assembly — and it would be a sham to hold meetings on the basis of that chapter if there is no such gift. The foundation prophets had a revelatory character; their function in the completion of the New Testament canon has been fulfilled. But that does not exhaust the subject of prophets and prophecy.

First Corinthians 13 draws a distinction. Tongues shall cease — the word used implies they peter out, slow down, and stop, which they did in the first century. But prophesying and knowledge are not said to cease; they are said to be done away when that which is perfect is come. The force of “done away” is that an action terminates them, and that action is the arrival of the perfection of glory. Prophecy and knowledge in their gift-character continue until then. William Kelly’s reminder applies: when we come to chapter 13, the Spirit expects we have read chapter 12 first, where the gift of prophecy appears among the gifts set in the church. What Judas and Silas did at Antioch — exhorted with many words and confirmed the brethren — is a clear example of prophesying in the non-revelatory sense that 1 Corinthians 14 describes.

Gift Is Not Office: Gifts in the Body, Elders in the City

Judas and Silas were prophets at Jerusalem. When they went to Antioch, they were prophets there. Had they gone anywhere else, they would have been prophets there too. Gift is in the body and goes wherever the member goes. Eldership is different: elders are appointed in each city, in each assembly, for that local sphere. The gift does not become local when the person is local; the office is specifically local and does not transfer.

Nor should it be supposed that only the most gifted should be heard. Paul was present at Antioch in verse 35, and he was an apostle who came behind in no gift. Yet Judas and Silas also ministered. The Lord Jesus as head of the body presides over the members and uses them according to his will, not according to the congregation's assessment of who is most impressive. On one occasion Agabus brought a word to the apostle Paul — which would have been unnecessary if all direction flowed only to the most gifted. The Lord chose Agabus for that message. This is the beauty of his lordship over the body.

There is no such thing as a prophet for the occasion, or an evangelist for the occasion, or a teacher for the occasion. Gift is not a momentary endowment raised up because someone lacks the permanent gift. This theory has been generated by weakness and lack of gifts and is, as one put it, brethrenistic — gotten up to cover what the Lord has withheld, perhaps governmentally, instead of getting before the Lord about it honestly. If prophesying were for the occasion, why was tongue-speaking not for the occasion? The tongue-speaker in 1 Corinthians 14 had to verify that an interpreter with the gift of interpretation was present before he could speak. He could not assume God would raise up an interpreter on the spot. The same Spirit who set the gifts also expected they would function as gifts, not as temporary providences for a deficient meeting.

Paul's Exercise and the Parting with Barnabas

Verse 36 shows the exercise of Paul's soul: some days after, he said to Barnabas, let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do. This was not programming or strategy; it was love for the saints. An exercised soul, having seen what the letter from Jerusalem meant and what it produced at Antioch, wanted to carry that to others. He wanted to see how they did.

The question of John Mark then arose. Barnabas wanted to take him; Paul did not think it good to take one who had departed from them at Pamphylia and gone not with them to the work. The contention was sharp and they parted. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; Paul chose Silas and departed. It is notable that the record of the brethren committing them to the grace of God is given only for Paul and Silas. Barnabas and Mark are not said to have been so commended — and if they were, the silence is itself significant. The spiritual state at Antioch recognized that something was not well.

J.G. Bellett wrote that we can purge out the leaven and fill the lump with honey — but eating too much honey is not good. Honey is the sweetness of human affection, of natural attachment. The attachment Barnabas had to Mark, his relative, was not wrong in itself; it had its place. But in the work of the Lord, what is due to Christ comes first, and the sweetness of natural bonds is not the criterion for decisions about the Lord's service. It was a small thing that caused a sharp contention and the parting of two men who had labored together through so much.

Yet the chapter closes with a beauty: Paul chose Silas, the prophet who had come from Jerusalem with the letter, who had exhorted and strengthened the brethren at Antioch with many words. What did Paul know of Silas? That he was a prophet, that he had served faithfully, that he had been sent from Jerusalem in that letter. In choosing Silas, Paul chose a man whose whole character in the chapter was bound up with the central message of it: the common judgment, the

Spirit's approval, the freedom of the Gentiles from the law, and the building up of the saints in that freedom.

Let go in peace. Judas and Silas exhorted the brethren with many words and confirmed them.