

HOW GOD WORKS
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ACTS 15, 16.

The entire Book of Acts was written to show Christ in action through the early church. Dr. Luke emphasizes this truth early when he writes “of all that Jesus began to do.” God was at work. God is still at work. But it helps us when we can objectify the work of God by hearing what He has done through others, and it helps us to be able to read about what God has done in the past. In these two fascinating chapters, Acts 15 and 16, we get some insight into the way God was at work in the early church.

The First Missionary Journey was over and the church had to decide on a very controversial and perplexing question, whether the Gentiles could be saved without becoming Jews. If they could not, then the Christian movement would stop in Jerusalem, and, if God did not use some other way, which of course He would, Christianity would not be the dominant religion in the world today. In fact, the Jerusalem Council gave the Gentiles an equal part in the Christian faith, and affirmed Paul’s contention that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female. We are all the same ‘in Christ’.

GOD WORKS BY USING CHRISTIAN AGREEMENT. AC 15:19 “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

² CHR 30 ¹² Also in Judah the hand of God was on the people to give them **unity** of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the LORD.

PS 133:1 How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in **unity**!

PS 133:2 It is like precious oil poured on the head,

RO 15:5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of **unity** among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

AC 15:22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one:

²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete **unity** to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

RO 15:5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of **unity** among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here at the first church council, the Church agreed that it was right for the Gentiles to be Christian without becoming Jews. They agreed that no burden should be laid upon them other than the law of purity and of respect for the Jewish Christians.

MOREOVER, PAUL AND BARNABAS WERE UNITED IN HAVING A BURDEN FOR THE BRETHREN. ^{AC 15:36} 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.” Paul was burdened for the Christian family that he had helped bring into existence, along with Barnabas, and particularly with the Holy Spirit. He wanted to disciple them even more to make sure, as he said of some others, that his labor was not in vain. He desired that each and every one of them would have Christ fully formed in them. For Christ in them was to Paul ‘the hope of glory’ in them.

One of the marks of Paul’s letters is the deep concern he has for those to whom he writes. His letters are marked with joy and rejoicing, but also with tears and weeping. I believe that many of the original manuscripts must have been spotted with the tears of this great man who had died to himself for the sake of others. This early concern in chapter 15 grew throughout Paul’s life until he would write, “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” He adds, “But for you, it is far better that I live.” He chose to live for the sake of those he served. God works through our burden for the Family of God, and for the lost.

GOD USES OUR AGREEMENT AS CHRISTIANS AND GOD USES OUR BURDEN FOR THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS WHO ARE MEMBERS OF CHRIST’S BODY. GOD WORKS THROUGH EACH OF THESE.

BUT GOD ALSO USES, NOT JUST THESE POSITIVE THINGS, BUT ALSO USES CONFLICT TO PERFORM HIS WILL.

^{AC 15:36} 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.

Too often the church fears conflict and wants only agreement. We are afraid that we are hurting someone’s feelings and that they will leave the church. We ought rather to fear God and to seek to do His will. If that means losing members, so be it. If that means being rejected, so be it. If that means being persecuted for your faith, so be it. If that means sounding foolish and looking foolish, so be it. We are not called to be popular, but we are commanded to be correct. Whenever everyone agrees with us something is desperately wrong. At times, as Christians who have minds and consciences, we should agree to disagree; and at times the disagreement is so sharp that we must part company. That happened to Martin Luther. The Augustinian Monk could not tolerate the direction that the Roman Catholic Church had taken with its sale of indulgences and its other heretical practices, so he wrote the his theses and nailed them to the wall for all to see.

Then, commanded to meet the pope's delegates and to be executed if he did not recant, said those famous words, "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; God help me!"

We must take our stand if we think our stand is in keeping with the will of God, and God will use conflict to do His will. Look at what happened to the participants of this church split. First look at John Mark, cousin of Barnabas and son of Mary, a believer whose house was the first Church in Jerusalem. Paul believed he was a quitter and a coward. But Barnabas believed in him and gave him a second chance. Did he take advantage of it? You bet he did. God used his failure to make him a stronger disciple. Later he helped Paul in Paul's Roman imprisonment.

^{COL 4:10} My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does **Mark**, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)
^{2 Tim 4:11} Only Luke is with me. Get **Mark** and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.

^{1PE 5:13} She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son **Mark**.

Mark had to grow up and he did. We find him ministering to Paul in Rome, we find Paul asking that Mark be sent to help him in the ministry. We find that he also is called by Simon Peter "my son Mark."

But there is more that you might not know about John Mark. First, we know that he wrote the first Gospel, the Gospel of Mark. He invented the literary style we label Gospel, that was later used by Matthew and Luke, and even later by John. Church historians Papias and Clement of Alexandria both tell us that Mark served as Peter's interpreter in Rome, and that he wrote his Gospel from Peter's remembrance. Eusebius, the church historian, says that Mark was the first evangelist in Egypt, and founder of the churches in Alexandria, and the first Bishop of the city of Alexandria. According to Eusebius, his commitment was so great and his sincerity so complete that he preached to myriad in attendance, and that he even astounded the philosopher Philo.

Could those things have been said of John Mark if that split had not occurred? He was not totally left to himself. He had Barnabas encouraging him. He needed both the strictness of Paul and the encouragement of Barnabas before he could become the great man he later became.

Conflict also helped in the life of another young man. Had not this split occurred there would have been no Timothy as we know him.

^{AC 16:1} 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.

^{Phi 2:22} But you know that **Timothy** has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. ²³ I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. ²⁴ And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

Timothy is mentioned in Acts and in the Epistles, 25 times. In each of these times he is mentioned in a positive light. He is also mentioned as the joint sender of six of Paul's epistles.

We know that Timothy was the son of a Greek father. But his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois were both Jews. He apparently had a good upbringing in Lystra, and was probably converted under Paul in the first missionary journey in that city. The historian Eusebius says that Timothy was the 1st Bishop of Ephesus. In 356 Constantius transferred what was thought to be Timothy's remains from Ephesus to Constantinople, and buried them in the church of the Apostles which was built by his father, Constantine.

No one was more faithful than Timothy. In the New Testament, this young man was an example of the Christian faith, doing whatever task Paul gave him. He would not have been the man he became had it not been for CONFLICT. GOD USES CONFLICT TO DO HIS WILL!

God also uses INNER CONFLICT. Notice what the Bible says,

^{AC 16:6} Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.

Later Paul would write about the inner conflict that the Holy Spirit caused in Asia, as they tried to do their own will.

^{2CO 1:8} We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of **Asia**. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. ⁹ Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

Can you imagine such pressure. Paul uses the phrases: 'the hardships we suffered'; and 'we were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure'; and 'we despaired even of life'; and 'in our hearts we felt the sentence of death.'

But, thank God, Paul knew why these pressures had come upon that company. God did not want them to preach in East, but to journey toward the West; for God knew who should have the Gospel, and He still does. Blackaby is right; we must work where God is working. Paul concluded that they felt death so that they could experience the resurrection.

God gives us inner conflict as well. Much of our inner pressure is there because we have not surrendered to the will of God. Much of the inner conflict we experience is there because we are holding back on something that God wants us to do. Obviously there are neurotic individuals who always feel conflicted. But God gives us inner conflict when we are away from His will. That inner conflict is not there to discourage us, but is there to bring us back to Himself. God uses inner conflict to bring us to Himself.

In the Old Testament God reminds Israel that if they go against His will:

Deut 28: 65 Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you an **anxious** mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. 66 You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life.

The Psalmist cried: PS 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my **anxious** thoughts. 24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

We need to pray this prayer so that God will lead us in the ‘way everlasting.’ It is only as we look at our pressures, anxieties, emotions, and lay them out before God and ask His help, can we find the right ways of God.

The Proverb writer said: PR 12:25 An **anxious** heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up.

In Ecc2 the Proverb writer said, 22 What does a man get for all the toil and **anxious** striving with which he labors under the sun? 23 All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.

God uses our anxiety and feelings of meaningless to give us true meaning in our lives through Jesus Christ his Son.

The best statement in the Bible is found in Philippians 4:6 Do not be **anxious** about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

God uses our inner conflicts to bring us nearer to himself.

GOD USES OUR AGREEMENT TO DO HIS WILL; BUT HE ALSO USES THE OUTER AND INNER CONFLICTS TO DO HIS WILL. A poem I remember says it quite well:

*I had walked life's way with an easy tread,
Had followed where comfort and pleasures led,
Until one day in a quiet place*

*I met the Master face to face.
With station and rank and wealth for my goal,
Much thought for my body, but none for my soul,
I had entered to win in life's mad race,
When I met the Master face to face.
I met Him, and knew Him and blushed to see
That His eyes full of sorrow, were fixed on me;
And I faltered and fell at His feet that day,
While my castles melted and vanished away.
Melted and vanished and in their place
Naught else did I see but the Master's face.
And I cried aloud, "Oh, make me meet
To follow the steps of Thy wounded feet."
My thought is now for the souls of men,
I have lost my life to find it again,
E'er since one day in a quite place
I met the Master face to face.*

--Author: Unknown

The inner-conflict you are feeling just now might be God's way of telling you to surrender your life to Him. The only way we can have real peace in our lives in the midst of conflict is when we say with Jesus, "Not my will, but Thy will be done."