

6-27-21 Who is Right, Paul or Barnabas?

Acts 15:34-41.

Everyone disagrees with someone at one time or another. Christians are not exempt; we fight and whine with the best of them. Sometimes we even try to use the scriptures to win our arguments. Now, that's not necessarily a bad thing but the intention in the heart of doing it can be.

The N.T. records some of the early arguments among believers. When you read Romans and I Corinthians, you discover that Christians disagreed on things like eating meat offered to idols, on whether to observe the Sabbath Day, or whether to eat meat or be a vegetarian, and on whether to drink wine.

We can read in Colossians a church that was torn by controversy over the proper role of angels, New Moon celebrations, and the proper diet for spiritual Christians.

In Thessalonica, the young church was deeply confused about the Second Coming of Christ. In Philippi there was evidently a major power struggle within the church, which is why Philippians contains such a strong plea for unity.

Today, I am not speaking about disagreements over the fundamental, non-negotiable doctrines. These truths are not "up for grabs," as if we could decide whether we believe that Jesus is God or whether we believe in the Second Coming, or deny the virgin birth, Jesus sinless life, death, burial and resurrection, or that saving faith is found by the gracious works of Jesus. Those truths belong to the **"faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3)**

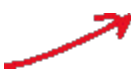
In this message we are looking at what we might call Category 2 disagreements, areas of doctrine or practice not involving the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

How do you determine God's will in those areas where Christians disagree?

First, **read verse 34-35. "...it seemed good to Silas to remain there."** No disagreement surprises God. He is never surprised, we may be, but He is not. He knows all, and sees all, and has a plan around all of it.

Read verses 36-38.

Paul, Barnabas, and young cousin John Mark went out to do the Lord's work and Dr. Luke wrote up what happened in **Acts 13:13-14.**

 **"Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem. 14 But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down."**

The most interesting fact about this passage is what it doesn't say. We can't be sure why John Mark left the team and returned to Jerusalem.

Maybe it was long mountain treks into possibly unfriendly towns. Perhaps it was more than John Mark bargained for. Perhaps he couldn't get along with Paul. Who knows? Maybe he felt that his cousin Barnabas should be the leader. Perhaps he was homesick for Jerusalem... we don't know, and it kills me! I want to know what happened!

But this much we know. At a crucial moment, John Mark suddenly left the team. No one knows the exact reason, but one day he said, "I'm leaving." So, he left Paul and Barnabas and returned home. When the time came for the second trip Barnabas said, "Let's give him another chance." To which Paul replied, "Forget it. We're not taking him." So, they argued over whether to take John Mark with them on the second trip.

Read verses 39-41.

In the end Paul and Barnabas disagreed so sharply that they finally decided to go their separate ways. Paul found a replacement for Barnabas (a man named Silas) and went north toward Asia Minor; Barnabas took John Mark and sailed west toward Cyprus. Having found no way to patch up their quarrel, they separated and went their own ways.

When an agreement or fight comes up between believers, what do we do with it? How do you determine God's will in those areas where Christians disagree?



I. Just because we have the same Lord doesn't mean we will always agree.

- How many are too cold? Too hot? Just, right?
- We have different churches and different denominations precisely because we don't see eye to eye on many issues. And inside every local church, you will find a bewildering variety of opinions.
- We all have different preferences when it comes to, dress, music, styles of preaching, drinks, cards, facial hair, tattoos, piercing, and food.
- We will not always see eye to eye on many things, many things that don't matter in the grand scheme of the gospel.




II. Sometimes our disagreements can be intense.


- **Read verse 39.** This wording in the Greek for "**contention became so sharp**" means a violent, hostile, angry, harsh, sharp, bitter disagreement. Most modern translations say they "disagreed sharply" or "argued."

- Their argument was continual, and it was contentious. They didn't just argue once and then let it go. They argued repeatedly. And the more they argued, the angrier they got. Barnabas knew he was right. Paul knew he was right. That raises a critical question. Who was right--Barnabas or Paul?
- Ministry or Mark? I have concluded you can make a good case either way.
- I believe Paul was thinking about the ministry. He had the big picture in mind. The mission, the ministry of the gospel was and is a hard work and Mark had left before. It is not for the faint of heart. Paul knew that there was no place for a quitter on a trip like that. Paul focused on the people he was trying to reach. He couldn't take the risk of having John Mark walk out on him again. He needed someone he could depend on 100%. That's what I mean when I say that Paul was looking at the ministry.
- Barnabas was thinking about the man. We know that John Mark was his cousin, which means there were probably family issues to consider. When Barnabas looked at John Mark, he said "We serve a God of grace. He is the God of the second chance. Our God never gives up on anybody." Barnabas saw real potential in his young cousin who had turned away when things got rough. "Paul, maybe you've written this guy off, but I'm not writing him off because God has not written him off. I believe in him even though he has failed. I want to give him another chance."
- How many believe Paul was right? Barnabas? Everyone has an opinion. If you're people-oriented, you'll probably move toward Barnabas. If you're task-oriented, you may side with Paul.
- I don't know about you, but I have had some intense disagreements with other Christian's. (When I was in my late 20's I made the chairmen of the deacon board so mad he called me a donkey...but the KJV wording for it.)

III. **Sometimes a separation is needed.**


- When they couldn't agree, only one solution remained. They split up and went in separate directions.
- In the **KJV, verse 39 says, "that they departed asunder one from the other:"** The Greek word means "to part asunder." It means a total break in the relationship. They were so angry that when they left, they didn't just part company, but their friendship at that point was torn apart.
- I find it interesting that Paul--the man who didn't want to take John Mark--writes more about the unity of the church than any other man in the New Testament. Do you remember what he says?

 **Romans 12:10, Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. (ESV)**

 **Romans 12:16, Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.**

 **Romans 12:18, If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.**

 **Ephesians 4:3, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (ESV)**

 **Colossians 3:13, bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.**

- Sometimes outward unity isn't possible. This is hard for some of us to admit. Sometimes separation may ultimately be preferable to continual, unending quarreling and disagreement.
- If Paul and Barnabas couldn't agree, then perhaps we won't always agree either.
- The command to unity is always there. Sometimes we will have to obey it separately, apart from one another.


 **IV. God's work will continue even during contentious disagreement.**

- Before the argument, there was Paul, Barnabas and Dr. Luke going in one direction. After, there is two teams headed in two different directions. (God wins!)


Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things (even big, fat, and ugly arguments) work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

- This does not justify anger or bitterness, but it does illustrate the biblical principal that God is able to make the wrath of man praise him.
- The Holy Spirit often uses conflict, disagreement, and disappointment to reveal God's will to you.
- God is able to work through even the most painful experiences of life not only to bless you, but to prepare you and to enable you to move on to the place where he wants you to be.
- I can personally testify that God is able to use the worst parts of life to show us his will. Nothing is wasted with our Heavenly Father.


V. If separation is necessary, let us do it with respect, not hatred and bitterness.

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- I think if there is any place to criticize Paul and Barnabas, it's right here. It seems to me that perhaps they went too far in their disagreement. It's not a sin to disagree. We don't have to agree on everything.
 - You want to play a ukulele on Sunday morning? Fine! That's okay. Want to go fishing? Go fishing. Want to wear pants, wear a kilt, grow a beard, home school your kids, listen to Ben Shapiro, vote for Trump or Biden, buy bag pipes, or pierce your ears? Go right ahead. We don't have to agree on every detail. But we can disagree without being disagreeable.
 - That is what is missing in the world and the church! Why do we have to hate the people we disagree with? It's not necessary to cancel, censor, shut down or even bully someone that disagrees with us. (God can handle it)

Three warning signs that we have crossed the line, we have allowed the disagreement to become anger and bitterness.

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1. **When the issue becomes a controlling passion of your life.** If you lie awake at night thinking about that person or persons wearing kilts and playing, "His eye is on the sparrow" with bag pipes and it bothers you. That's all you can think about, it's all you can talk about during the day. You've gone too far when the issue--whatever it is--becomes the controlling passion in your life.
 2. **When you begin to attack the person and not the problem.** Attacking the problem means studying the issue, sorting out the good and bad points, thinking through other ways of looking at things, and so on. Attacking the person means losing your temper, questioning motives, and using intimidation to get your own way. When it gets personal, we've gone too far.

In the heat of controversy, it's easy to spread rumors or tell stories or twist facts to make someone else look bad. At that point you've gone way over the line. It doesn't matter how big or how little the issue is, you ought to be able to discuss it rationally without stooping to gossip and character assassination.
 3. **When you would rather talk about "your issue" than about Jesus Christ.** This is often where Christian disagreement ends up. Jesus becomes a casualty of our in-fighting. Sometimes our message to the world seems to be, "God loves you, but we hate each other."



Too often we fight so much about secondary things that Jesus gets pushed to the side. Is it any wonder that the world shrugs off our message? When you would rather fight other Christians than share Christ with the lost, something has gone wrong in your spiritual life.

- If we must disagree--and sometimes we do, and if we have to go our separate ways--and sometimes we do, then let us disagree agreeably--with respect.

VI. **Because of Christ our goal is reconciliation and restoration.**

- This doesn't come easily. I know exactly what I'm talking about at this point. From personal experience, I can tell you that it's not easy to restore fellowship with brothers who have been offended.

Proverbs 18:19, "A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarreling is like the bars of a castle." (ESV)

- There is nothing left for Paul and Barnabas to do but to go their separate ways. Paul goes north, Barnabas goes west. They separate and as far as we know they don't meet again for years. Time passes, tempers cool down, a new perspective comes, they begin to see things in a different light, and the Holy Spirit does His healing work.
- Let's look at Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark's future 10 years later. What does he think about Barnabas? We have one verse to read.

1 Corinthians 9:6, Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working?

- What about John Mark the quitter?

Colossians 4:10, Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him)


- John Mark and Paul are not only friends, but now that Paul is in prison, who's there taking care of him? That quitter, John Mark.
- Three more years pass. Paul is in jail for the last time. Soon he will be put to death. From his prison cell in Rome, he writes to young Timothy. These are his last recorded words in Scripture.

2 Timothy 4:9-11, Be diligent to come to me quickly; 10 for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica—Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry.


- Once Paul wanted nothing to do with John Mark, he walked away from his most loyal and biggest friend/cheer leader Barnabas because of him. Now 13-15 years later, Paul is saying, "bring Mark with you, I need him."

- That's what the Gospel of Jesus Christ can do. Sometimes our disagreements seem so deep that we think that we are separated forever. But because we're still in the family of God, there's always the possibility of reconciliation even though it may take centuries.
- **Francis Schaeffer's book, "The Mark of the Christian"** he argued that love must be the defining mark of the Christian. That's the label we must wear in all our relationships. He emphasizes that the world is not looking for outward unity, but outward love. We'll disagree on a thousand issues. That's okay as long as we love each other. If we disagree, we can disagree agreeably and so demonstrate that we are still part of God's great family. If we must disagree, even if we must separate, we must disagree with respect and not with anger and bitterness.
- We must always hold out the possibility of future reconciliation. How do you do that? The most important factor involved in reconciliation is time. Give God time to soften hearts.
- Time doesn't heal all wounds, but sometimes the passage of time allows a new perspective to develop. Eventually those issues that once seemed so important may recede into the background.
- It's important not to continually bring up past disagreements. If you live in the past, you're going to be fighting in the past. Eventually you must move out of the past and into the present. That involves a conscious choice to forgive those who, in the time of conflict, brutalized you. It's not easy to do that, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, you can rise above past hurts to discover the joy of reconciliation.

 **VII. Stand by your convictions knowing God may lead someone else differently that He has you.**

 **Romans 14:5, "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind."**

- If you want a beard, grow one. Do you like your pastors clean-shaven? Fine! Hold on to that. If you're a home schooler, be fully convinced. Do you prefer the public schools? That's wonderful. What about Christian schools? Great! Nothing I am saying implies that you shouldn't have convictions. You should.
- But that's only part of it.

 **Romans 15:5-6, Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, 6 that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

- God places a high value on Christian unity. Hold on to your convictions but do it in a loving fashion. After all, your convictions may change over time. What you oppose so strongly today may, in a different context, become less-than-crucial to you in the future.
- What are somethings you might have fought over in the past that doesn't hold the same passion today?
- We're different and that's okay. We don't agree on everything and that's okay. Sometimes in the family of God we're going to disagree strongly and that's okay. Sometimes we're going to disagree to the point that we can't even work together anymore. That's okay too.
- But we do have to love one another. That's a non-negotiable command of Jesus Christ (**John 13:35**). No matter how much or how passionately we disagree, we still must love each other.

“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Conclusion

Here's a simple, five-step outline for discovering God's will in doubtful areas where Christians disagree:

Step # 1: Pray for guidance.

Step # 2: Search the Scriptures.

Step # 3: Seek godly counsel.

Step # 4: Ask God to give you specific direction.

Step # 5: Decide what you believe.

And don't grumble when others see things differently. Do what you believe to be right before the Lord and let God worry about those other people.

That reminds me, who was right--Paul or Barnabas? I don't think the Bible really answers that question.

So many of our arguments end up the same way. When it's all over, you're not totally sure who's right. Even after you study both sides, you can see some points here and some points there. As long we live in a fallen world, most of our disagreements will end up that way.

When we get to heaven, the Lord will reveal the truth to us. Between now and then, there are going to be plenty of disagreements in the church. That's part of the price we pay for being human.

But we have the opportunity to deal with our disagreements honestly and graciously because we know Jesus Christ. He makes the difference.

What do you do when Christians disagree? Hold your convictions but hold them in love.