

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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CHRISTIAN DISAGREEMENTS

Acts 15:36-41

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Today's sermon has three points:

- Paul and Barnabas planned another missionary trip.
- Paul and Barnabas disagreed.
- Paul and Barnabas parted ways.

INTRODUCTION - Last week, we read about the dispute that arose in the early church regarding whether the Gentile Christians needed to follow the Mosaic law and be circumcised. The elders of the Church of Jerusalem agreed with Paul and Barnabas that salvation is by faith alone. Afterwards, Paul and Barnabas took an official letter back to the Antioch Church concluding the matter. Today, we pick up in chapter 15 where we find Paul itching to hit the road again.

PAUL AND BARNABAS PLANNED ANOTHER MISSIONARY TRIP

SCRIPTURE: Acts 15:36

Sometime later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."

EXPLANATION: Because we are reading the story of Paul's travels over the course of a few chapters, it may seem as if all this took place in a few months. However, several years had passed since the last time Paul and Barnabas visited the churches they helped established.

The apostles had been a primary instrument in the salvation of many people, and they likely considered some of them close friends. It was natural that Paul wanted to check on them. He felt a certain responsibility for their well-being and wanted to encourage them in their faith.

ILLUSTRATION: A father often told his little son, "I love you so much, and I know that God has great plans for you." It was not until the son was a teenager that

he finally confessed to his dad. He thought his dad was saying, “God has great plants for you.” For years, he imagined that God was going to make the saplings in his back yard grow into big trees just for him.

APPLICATION: Like the little boy, sometimes our plans are not quite the same as the father’s. Sometimes they are not even very good. However, that was not the case with Paul and Barnabas.

After the resurrection, Jesus told Peter to take care of his sheep. Paul may have heard Peter tell that story. He was also familiar with Old Testament passages that talked about godly leaders tending their flocks. Paul was a spiritual shepherd, and he took that role very seriously. He wanted to take care of the people God placed in his path. I am sure that Barnabas felt the same way.

So Paul and Barnabas planned another missionary trip. It was a good plan, but...

PAUL AND BARNABAS DISAGREED

SCRIPTURE: Acts 15:37-38

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.

EXPLANATION: The plan may have been good, but Paul and Barnabas found a point of contention. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark on the trip. Do you remember John Mark? He was the cousin of Barnabas who went on the first missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas. However, John Mark did not last long and returned home prematurely.

Barnabas may have felt that his cousin deserved another chance. After all, doesn’t everyone? As someone known for encouraging others, it was in Barnabas’s nature to seek out the best in others. Barnabas rightly saw potential in the young man and thought that John Mark had much to offer the kingdom. He didn’t believe that one rash act should disqualify John Mark from service.

Paul, on the other hand, was probably a little gun shy. Missionary trips are serious business. Paul was a man of principles, someone who did not compromise, and he needed teammates he could trust. John Mark’s unexpected departure on the first trip

was probably frustrating. Paul didn't think the young man had handled his responsibilities well the first go-around and was not sure he wanted to take that kind of risk again. The dangers of the road and preaching the gospel were hard enough. It didn't seem worth the added trouble of taking on a frightened newbie who might tuck tail and run at the slightest bit of trouble.

Was one apostle right and the other wrong?

ILLUSTRATION: Years ago, a small Kentucky church wanted to embark on an extravagant building plan involving a lot of debt. After much discussion, the pastor and leaders set a date for the church vote. One couple talked and prayed about the decision. Unfortunately, the husband had to be out of town for work on the night of the vote. The wife knew she would attend alone and would, in essence, be casting one vote for herself that would reflect how she and her husband felt about the matter. So, she prayed and fasted some more, asking God to confirm the decision she and her husband had made.

After church on a Wednesday evening, the pastor presented the motion and asked all those in favor to raise their hands. Hands shot up all over the sanctuary. The pastor then asked if anyone opposed. The young woman looked around and slowly raised hers. The pastor seemed to question what he saw. So, he asked again, "All those *opposed* raise your hand." The woman raised her hand a little higher. Incredulous, the pastor looked at her and said, "You're opposed?" All heads turned towards her as she said "yes."

The vote passed, and the church embarked on the building plan. The young couple continued worshiping and serving there for many years.

Was the couple wrong by casting a negative vote? They do not think so. Even though the wife was publicly called out and embarrassed, even though it did not really make a difference in the way things turned out, to this day, they believe they voted the way that God wanted them to vote.

Barnabas and Paul were both good men with a good plan standing on good principles. So, Paul and Barnabas planned another missionary trip, and then they disagreed.

PAUL AND BARNABAS PARTED WAYS

SCRIPTURE: Acts 15:39-41

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 believers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

EXPLANATION: This was not just a small difference of opinion. The Bible says that Paul and Barnabas had a “sharp” disagreement. The Greek word (*paroksysmós*) here indicates the type of provocation that jabs or cuts someone so that they must respond. Paul and Barnabas did not just disagree. They had a dispute so severe that they decided it was best to part ways. Barnabas took his young cousin and headed towards the first area where he and Paul ministered—his home country of Cyprus. Paul chose a new traveling companion named Silas and headed in the opposite direction toward Syria.

These were two good men with good principles and a good plan who disagreed so strongly that they parted ways.

APPLICATION: This story raises several interesting questions for believers.

- Is it OK for Christians to disagree?
- Can two people have different opinions and both be right?
- Do Christians sometimes have to part ways? If so, does that mean that we do not love Christ or one another?
- Can God work through or despite our disagreements?

Let's think about these questions one at a time.

Is it OK for Christians to disagree? Christians are human, just like the rest of mankind. God did not make us cookie-cutter images of one another and does not expect us to be. Each of us has unique preferences. You may like green. I prefer blue. You may enjoy loud music. I like to play mine softly. I like ice cream. You may want broccoli. No two of us are alike. So, we will never agree 100% on everything. Of course, our beliefs should always be founded in God's word and the truth we find there, but even still, in this life, in this world, there is a lot of leeway for individualism. Therefore, there is no doubt, at times, even as Christians, we will disagree.

Can two people have different opinions and both be right? The Bible gives us clear examples of right and wrong. In those cases, there is no argument. But Barnabas and Paul were both correct in their thinking. Neither was wrong. There are some choices that we are given the freedom to make outside of scriptural instruction. Such was the case regarding whether to take John Mark on the second missionary journey. None of us are perfect. None of us have a perfect track record in decision-making. Sometimes two people can have the right motives and the right intentions and the right ideas and be in complete disagreement. Let us think about a building program, for example. Like the young couple in the illustration, some people may believe that God wants his people to step out in faith and borrow money to build. Others may believe that debt is not being a good steward of God's resources. Both have valid points. Neither is necessarily wrong.

Do Christians sometimes have to part ways? If so, does that mean that we do not love Christ or one another? There are many opportunities for compromise among believers, but sometimes, there is no happy medium. There are times when it's best to part ways.

Disagreeing is not necessarily a sin. How we handle a disagreement, however, can be sinful. God makes it clear that we are to love one another. That means we are to love one another—even if we cannot agree. Unfortunately, the Bible does not tell us a lot about what happened to Barnabas and John Mark after this separation, but we do get a very important hint in Paul's second letter to Timothy. Near the end of that letter, Paul writes, "Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you because he is helpful to me in my ministry." (2 Timothy 4:11) The physical separation that occurred between Paul and Barnabas did not extend to the spiritual connection they felt as believers. It even seems that John Mark and Paul had the opportunity to extend their friendship later in Paul's ministry.

Even when believers part ways physically, they should do so in a manner of reconciliation. Christians should be able to love and respect one another even when they disagree.

Can God work through or in spite of our disagreements? Absolutely! Neither Paul nor Barnabas quit serving the Lord because of this disagreement. In fact, because they separated, they were able to cover twice the amount of territory. While the

Bible does not share a lot of Barnabas's remaining life story, historical documents and oral tradition indicate that Barnabas, like many of the early apostles and disciples, was martyred for his faith. John Mark was commended by Paul and wrote the book of Mark, so we can assume that Barnabas's love and teaching helped mold him into a more disciplined follower of Christ. God continued to work in and through both Paul and Barnabas despite this disagreement.

If we handle our disagreements in a Christ-like way, he can do the same for us.

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