

# Acts

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)*

## **When Good Christians Disagree**

**October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023**

**Acts 15:36-41**

**Rev. Levi denBok**

### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 15.

Our passage this morning brings us to a surprising and – at first glance – disappointing episode in the early church. It is *especially* surprising in light of what we saw in our passage last Sunday.

Last Sunday, we read Luke's account of the Jerusalem council – a story that is rightly considered to be the structural and theological CENTRE of the book of Acts. In what was the most significant deliberation of the early church, a monumental decision was made: the Gentiles did not need to become Jews in order to come to Jesus. They didn't need to be circumcised. They didn't need to come under the law of Moses and to adopt a new diet. Peter declared:

But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.  
(Acts 15:11 ESV)

ALL OF US – Jews and Gentiles alike – are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. That decision was a VERY big deal!

And the council didn't stop there. They also ruled that the Gentiles should be thoughtful and courteous toward their Jewish brothers and sisters so as not to cause needless offence. They put some guidelines in place to enable the church to live and worship together in unity, and the whole congregation agreed with the plan.

The story of the Jerusalem council was a MASSIVE win as the church stood united and likeminded.

Our passage this morning, however, feels more like an embarrassing loss. It's as if – before turning the page on this chapter – Luke hits us with a cold reality check.

In our text today, Paul and Barnabas – two of the speakers from the council who helped to foster this beautiful unity in the church – get into a dispute about their next missionary journey. The men who helped to bridge the cultural divide in the congregation find themselves unable to bridge the personal divide in their own relationship.

Acts 15 ends with a sobering reminder that – in spite of our unity in the gospel – sometimes good Christians are going to disagree.

Look with me now at verses 36-41. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."<sup>37</sup> Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.<sup>38</sup> But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.<sup>39</sup> And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus,<sup>40</sup> but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.<sup>41</sup> And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. (Acts 15:36-41 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Luke has just finished his report on the miraculous unity that was brought about at the Jerusalem council and then, *in the same breath*, he tells us that Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp disagreement that they dissolved their partnership and went separate ways? Seriously?

We are reminded in this passage that, for as long as we live in this fallen world, perfect unity will always be out of reach.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Luke chose not to edit out this embarrassing detail. As we've often said over the course of this series, none of these stories are included by mistake. I suspect that we have *this* story in our Bibles because sometimes good Christians *are* going to disagree – and we need to be thoughtful about how to handle those disagreements if – or rather, *when* – they come.

### **When Good Christians Disagree:**

Before we press ahead, please note the heading. This is a story about *Christians* disagreeing. Meaning – the lessons that we learn here do not apply to some of the other disagreements that we will face in life. For example, Paul adopted a very *different* approach when he disagreed with heretics and false teachers. In Galatians 5:12, he wrote about some false teachers who were preaching a false gospel and he exclaimed:

I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves! (Galatians 5:12 ESV)

THAT approach is different than the approach that we find here. There IS a time for sharp words. There IS a time for clear denunciation. There ARE black and white issues. That's true. And when we get to those passages, we'll draw out those lessons.

But *this* passage reminds us that not all disagreements call for sharp words. Sometimes we're going to disagree with good Christians brothers and sisters about non-gospel issues, and those disagreements call for a different approach.

Now that our categories are clear, the first lesson we learn from this story is that, when good Christians disagree:

#### **1. It is not necessarily a mark of immaturity**

If this story were not included, then we might be tempted to come out of Acts 15 thinking, "Well, look at that! When the church is filled with the Spirit, and when the leaders are humble, and when the issues are discussed openly, unity is guaranteed!" That would be amazing if it were true! Wouldn't it?

The problem with that line of thinking, however, is that it is naïve. It also positions you for disappointment. Because even Spirit-filled, humble Christians who are committed to healthy dialogue often find themselves in disagreement.

I think that one of the reasons why Luke included this story was so that we wouldn't be caught off guard by this reality. Matthew Henry says the same thing. He writes:

That we are not to think it strange if there be differences among wise and good men; we were told before that such offences would come, and here is an instance of it.<sup>1</sup>

Disagreement happens. Even Paul and Barnabas – brothers who had risked their lives together in missionary work – found themselves at an impasse.

It happens.

Should they have plugged their noses on this issue and forced a compromise? Should they have ignored their earnest convictions and moved ahead with a plan that neither of them were comfortable with? There's a part of us that is inclined to say, "yes!" isn't there? There's a part of us that thinks that any semblance of disagreement is a mark of immaturity. But I don't think that's what we're meant to take from this story. They didn't disagree because they were immature. They disagreed because they were *human*.

We see through a glass dimly. We don't have all the answers. We each come with our own biases. We're being transformed into the image of Jesus, but none of us have arrived yet. G. Campbell Morgan has an interesting response to this story. Rather than being disappointed by it, he explains:

I am greatly comforted whenever I read this. I am thankful for the revelation of the humanity of these men.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary On The Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1705.

<sup>2</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 369.

The apostles were not superhuman, nor were they angels. They were people like us. They were used by the Lord to do powerful things, but they also disagreed with one another from time to time. Your most esteemed leaders are no different.

Hear that. If Paul and Barnabas disagreed, then Christian leaders who you respect are going to disagree from time to time as well. That's OKAY! That's par for the course! Healthy disagreement is not a mark of immaturity.

This issue comes up all the time whenever young Christians try to wrap their minds around the various denominations within Christianity. They assume that the church ought to be completely likeminded, and the presence of real disagreements can feel like a real crisis of faith.

I was rocked by this in my younger years. When I was a young Christian, my friends and I started a community worship night called One Tribe. Disclaimer: This was a long time ago, and I was a teenager, so please listen charitably.

We ran One Tribe once a month, and we brought posters to all the local churches and met with as many local pastors as we could. We invited Anglicans, Lutherans, Pentecostals, and even the *Baptists*! We didn't have a clue what denominations were, and we certainly didn't understand the areas of disagreement. But we didn't care! If they were REAL Christians, then they would ignore their differences and come to our worship night!

But, to our surprise, some of the pastors in town didn't jump on board. They met with me, asked me questions, and then graciously informed me that they would not be able to be involved. I confess, as a young believer, I didn't know what to make of that. We were a group of teenagers with no theological understanding, no oversight, and very little biblical knowledge. What could go wrong?! If we all love Jesus, and if we all love one another, and if we all read the same Bible, then shouldn't we all be perfectly likeminded? Isn't that what Christian unity looks like?

In reality, those brothers and sisters had taken the time to understand each other. They knew where they agreed with one another, and they knew where they disagreed. They knew what they could do together, and they knew what needed to be done apart. By ignoring their wisdom, my friends and I made a real mess.

Disagreement is not necessarily a mark of immaturity.

Second, we learn from this story that, when good Christians disagree:

## **2. It is because people are diverse, and problems are complex**

Let's take a moment to consider this particular argument in Acts 15. Look again at verses 37-39:

Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. <sup>38</sup> But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. <sup>39</sup> And there arose a sharp disagreement (Acts 15:37-39a ESV)

This sharp disagreement revolves around John Mark. Paul and Barnabas are about to take off on their second missionary trip, and Barnabas wants to bring John Mark along. John Mark, if you remember, accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, but then he quit halfway through. We read about that in Acts 13:

Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. **And John left them and returned to Jerusalem** (Acts 13:13 ESV)

So, in Paul's mind, John Mark is a quitter. From what we know about the Apostle Paul, his personality type likely would have had a really hard time tolerating quitters. Paul was an all-in, never-surrender, work-til-you-drop kind of guy.

He was also painfully aware of the difficulty of the task that lay ahead. He had been insulted, whipped, and stoned on the last missionary journey. As one commentator notes:

The scar tissue of the wounds Paul suffered in establishing his missionary policy was still too tender for him to look favourably on Mark's being with them<sup>3</sup>

There were times when Paul needed his companions to carry his broken body on to the next town! This was not a vacation, and Paul was not running a daycare. There was no room on the team for dead weight, and the mission was too important to take a risk on a quitter.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 454.

I suspect that Paul was also suspicious of Barnabas' motives in bringing John Mark. In Colossians 4, we learn that John Mark was Barnabas' cousin. I can just imagine the conversation. "Barnabas, you are IGNORING the obvious! You are more committed to your cousin than you are to the mission! I'd love to bring *my family* too, but we are heading into a WAR ZONE! I can't risk the mission for Mark. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me!"

On the other side of the disagreement, we have Barnabas. And, while it is possible that Barnabas *was* biased because of his cousin, I'm inclined to believe that he was simply doing what Barnabas always did – he was refusing to write people off. In fact, it was this same instinct – this same commitment to grace and second chances – that brought Paul and Barnabas into ministry together in the first place! Do you remember back in chapter 9 when Paul – the former TERRORIST – came to the church to tell them that he was a new man? We read in verses 26-27:

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> **But Barnabas took him** and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. (Acts 9:26-27 ESV)

I can just imagine how Barnabas might have responded to Paul's rejection of John Mark. "Do you hear yourself, Paul? You of ALL people should know that people change! You of ALL people should know that we serve a God who gives second chances! I don't want to bring him because I'm his *cousin*! I want to bring him because I'm his *brother in Christ* and I want to see God restore him to this assignment – just like He restored a man I once knew named Saul."

As one commentator summarizes it:

It is a classic example of the perpetual problem of whether to place the interests of the individual or of the work as a whole first, and there is no rule of thumb for dealing with it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 258.

Let me ask you: who was right? Was Paul right to insist that the mission not be jeopardized by a quitter? Or was Barnabas right to insist that John Mark's restoration was worth the risk? I suspect that we would have people landing on either side of that argument.

Therefore, is it any wonder that good Christians disagree? Problems are complex. And so are people! Not everything is black and white.

I don't enjoy pointing back to this season, but isn't this exactly what we saw during Covid? We all did our best to make wise, biblical, faithful decisions, but not ONE of us made that decision free from bias. Our decisions were informed by our relationships, and by our personalities, and by our past experiences, and – naturally – we didn't all land in the same place. LEADERS that we respected didn't land in the same place!

It was hard to make sense of that! It was hard to reconcile the deep disagreement that we saw all around us. And, at times, we made the mistake of pretending that the issue was black and white when it never was.

One thing that I hope we will do better in the future disagreements that will inevitably arise is that we will resist the urge to pretend that complex problems are simple. Good Christians are going to disagree because people are diverse, and problems are complex.

Third, we learn from this story that, when good Christians disagree:

### **3. It may lead to a parting of ways, but it should never lead to sin**

Paul and Barnabas felt strongly about their respective positions. They felt so strongly, in fact, that they decided that the best course of action was to part ways. We see that in verses 39-40:

And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus,<sup>40</sup> but Paul chose Silas and departed having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. (Acts 15:39-40 ESV)

The disagreement that drove them apart was deep and convictional. These two godly, mature men found themselves unable to get past it.



It's unfortunate when believers need to part ways, but it is not inherently sinful. For example, we disagree with our Presbyterian brothers and sisters about baptism. That's a real, complicated, and convictional disagreement. Can we worship together and love one another? Absolutely! Should we launch out on mission and plant a church together? Probably not. Our disagreement is significant enough that it is wise for us to part – even as we labour toward the same goal.

That's what Paul and Barnabas did. They continued toward the same goal, but they chose to embark in different directions. Sometimes that's the wisest course of action.

And yet, while they decided to move forward in separate directions, there is no record of any sinful immaturity in this dispute.

Not once does Paul slander or undermine Barnabas or John Mark in any of his letters. In fact, he seems to have eventually come around to trusting John Mark because, in his final days he wrote to Timothy and asked:

Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. (2 Timothy 4:11b ESV)

So, while they parted ways in mission, they didn't harbour unforgiveness toward one another. They were still brothers in Christ. And that love endured to the end.

In a world where disagreements are bound to happen, let's do our very best to get this right.

One area where this principle readily applies is when it comes to switching churches. I'll confess that I'm a bit of an idealist, and I LOVE the idea of staying in one congregation right to the finish line. I love the idea of weathering the ups and downs, navigating through the offences, and resolving the disagreements – in the same way that you would in a family. I LOVE that ideal.

But, as we see in this text, disagreements are complicated. Sometimes, you really DO bump into issues that you can't find alignment on. And sometimes, the godliest thing to do is to lovingly agree to disagree and to go in separate directions.

If you find yourself in that position, I want to challenge you this morning. It's not wrong to part ways, but it can *become* wrong if you don't guard your heart. Don't allow yourself to slip into gossip. Don't slander. Don't harbour unforgiveness. Don't keep a record of wrongs. Be exemplary in your conduct. How sweet would it be if, in your final days, you could ask for a visit from the people you disagreed with at that old church the way that Paul asked for a visit from John Mark? In this fallen world where we see through a glass dimly, healthy disagreement may lead to a parting of ways. But it should never lead to sin.

Fourth, finally, and most importantly, we learn from this story that when good Christians disagree:

#### **4. God's mission still moves forward**

If you were to ask me to summarize in one sentence why this story is in the Bible, I would say that it is here to remind us that God uses *everything* to move His mission forward – even the disagreements of His people. The great preacher G. Campbell Morgan captures the same thought with more elegance when he writes:

The sweep of the river is troubled, but it moves forward in the counsel of God.<sup>5</sup>

Through this disagreement, two missionary teams were sent out instead of one. Barnabas and Mark sailed to Cyprus. Paul and Silas marched to Syria. Twice as much ministry was accomplished! Twice as many churches were strengthened and encouraged!

And as teams multiplied, so too did opportunities. As it turns out, Barnabas was wise to invest in John Mark. He proved to be an effective missionary, and, in his end-of-life assessment, Paul counted him as a faithful brother and a helper in ministry. John Mark is the author of the Gospel of Mark. The church is stronger because of the investment that was made in this brother.

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<sup>5</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 369.

Similarly, Paul was enabled to invest more in Silas (who, admittedly, we don't know much about), and he also had space on his team to incorporate Timothy – a young man that we will meet next Sunday – who became his powerful partner in ministry.

The disagreement was unfortunate, but God used that parting of ways to bring about so much good!

Because that's what God does. He redeems our disagreements, and then He providentially uses them to further His work in the world.

Praise God for that! God redeems the messes that we make.

We've been considering this disagreement between Paul and Barnabas which seems to have been a healthy disagreement. But this principle applies even to our *unhealthy* disagreements.

Maybe you left your old church poorly, and you said a lot of things that fill you with embarrassment and regret. Maybe you lived through a church split. Maybe you even *led* the church split. I suspect that many of us could confess this morning that – even though we feel like we are in the right place today – we came here by the wrong path.

If that's you, then find comfort in this story. In the same way that God used the persecution of Acts 8 to launch the church into mission, so too does He use the disagreement of Acts 15 to double His missionary teams! Now, that doesn't give us license to be divisive any more than it gives us license to persecute the church, but it DOES give us a powerful reminder that God is in the business of redeeming our broken stories. As Joseph explained:

As for you, you meant evil against me, **but God meant it for good**, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. (Genesis 50:20 ESV)

God is building His church, and there is nothing that will thwart His plan. Not the devil. Not the opposition of the world. Not even the disagreements and divisions of the people of God. Every time we encounter an obstacle that looks like it will halt the mission of God, He turns it around and uses it for good. This is who He is. This is what He does. And this is the word of the Lord.