

When Personal Disagreements Separate Brethren

Acts 15:36-41; Romans 12:18

May 14, 2017

Greg L. Price

Personal disagreements will inevitably come in any relationship (whether in a marriage between husband and wife, at work between fellow employees, or in the church between brothers and sisters in Christ). The disagreements may become very heated at times over matters that are not clearly a violation of God's Law, but rather over matters that are about personal preferences.

Our goal as Christians should be to live at peace as much as possible with those around us—at least on our parts seeking to remove all obstacles that lead to heated disagreements at home, in the church, and at work (Romans 12:18). A home where nearly every decision is a hill upon which you are willing to die is a home that will be filled with constant battles and little peace in it. Dear ones, I am not minimizing the decisions we make. Decisions that have serious consequences must be those that are prayerfully and carefully made, but even at such times it is unnecessary to throw angry, cutting words that damage or destroy a relationship.

Consider some of the heated arguments you have had in your home over unnecessary and trivial matters (the color of paint to use in the bedroom). Why are we willing to damage a relationship and trample upon peace at home, in the church, or at work over such decisions that are made? Is it because I must be right? Is it because I must show that I am in control? Is it because I must show how intelligent I am? Dear ones, how important is it to you to maintain as much peace and order in your relationships as possible—especially with fellow Christians? Relationships that are constantly filled with tension over heated personal disagreements are relationships that are fighting for control in one way or another rather than fighting for peace. If we would fight as hard in prayer to have peace with one another and remove those landmines in our marriages that damage our relationships as we fight over so many unnecessary disagreements, we would see Christ work in a mighty way.

We certainly cannot compromise when it comes to obedience to the commandments of the Lord (sanctifying the Lord's Day). We must speak the truth in love. The commandment of the Lord must be obeyed, otherwise we are being hypocritical in calling Jesus Lord (Luke 6:46).

Paul and Barnabas, two of the heroes of the early church, had a sharp personal disagreement that led to each going down a different path of ministry within the same Visible Church. What can we learn from what the Holy Spirit has included in this portion of Acts 15 that is important in considering personal disagreements and in seeking peace in the family, at work, and particularly in the church?

The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) The Content of the Personal Disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-38); (2) The Result of the Personal Disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39-41).

I. The Content of the Personal Disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-38).

A. Is it not just like the enemy to look for an opportunity to divide close brethren after they have fought in the same trenches against the onslaught of false teachers and have stood together at the first Presbyterian Synod to confirm the true gospel of Jesus Christ?

1. A great peace prevailed in the Church in removing the sinister doctrine of works

righteousness; likewise a great joy reigned in the hearts of those Gentile believers who received the synodical letter (Acts 15:31), which censured the false teachers who promoted justification by faith plus works, and which called Gentile believers to abstain from all idolatrous associations in order to avoid offense to themselves and to others (Acts 15:23-29).

2. Paul and Barnabas had gone through so much together. Barnabas (the son of consolation) introduced Paul and stood with him when many in the Church of Jerusalem feared that Paul's conversion was a charade to gain access to the Church in order to destroy it (Acts 9:26-27). Barnabas (the son of consolation) was the one who realized his need of Paul's help and who left Antioch and went to Tarsus in order to call Paul to minister alongside him in teaching and preaching in the Church of Antioch (Acts 11:25-26). Here was a team that had prevailed through all of the persecution of that first missionary journey to Cyprus and to the cities of Galatia. And this same team stood together at the Synod of Jerusalem in defending justification by faith alone in Christ alone. But after all this toil, persecution, and standing together in the truth, the enemy torpedoed this team, dividing them over a personal disagreement. It's tragic when it happens. It breaks the heart to see what happens here between Paul and Barnabas. We should not casually or quickly pass over what happened. The Holy Spirit has included it for our instruction.

3. Dear ones, if it could happen to Paul and Barnabas, it can happen in your marriage or mine and in your relationship with brethren or mine. Never take the peace you have with your husband or wife, with children, or with your brothers and sisters for granted, for at any time the enemy is just waiting for the right opportunity to divide and conquer. As we see here, even mature Christians in the faith and leaders in the church will be targeted with such severe disagreements that they will no longer walk down the same road together. Let us look more closely at personal disagreement that led Paul and Barnabas down different paths.

B. After the Synod in Jerusalem had concluded and Paul and Barnabas had returned to the Church of Antioch to continue their ministry together there, a relatively short period of time passed while they taught and preached together with many other ministers the Lord had raised up. Paul proposed to Barnabas a plan to revisit the churches that had been established in their first missionary journey in Cyprus and in Galatia (Acts 15:36). Paul had his sights on always expanding the borders of the kingdom—he was the apostle to the Gentiles and having planted new churches on the island of Cyprus and in the province of Galatia, his heart burned to know how these new churches were doing. Before gaining new converts, it was most important to make disciples of those who had already come to Christ. Remember that Paul had written the Letter to the Galatians from Antioch before the Synod of Jerusalem. That letter was a defense of the gospel of Jesus Christ against false teachers who promoted another gospel (which was no gospel at all). Had these churches fallen into the hands of the false teachers? Were they growing? Were the elders they appointed defending the sheep like faithful shepherds? Paul had a father's heart for his spiritual children. He yearned to see their progress and growth in Christ, and so he proposed to revisit these new churches to confirm them in the faith and to exhort them to perseverance.

C. After the proposal, there arose a major disagreement between Paul and Barnabas as to whether John Mark should accompany them once again. Barnabas very much wanted John Mark to join them; Paul just as passionately resisted Barnabas on this (Acts 15:37-38).

1. John Mark was a relative of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10), who had initially accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey as far as Cyprus, but when they sailed to the city of Perga in Pamphylia, John Mark left Paul and Barnabas and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Whether John Mark became fearful of what lay ahead, or found the hardships they had already faced too difficult, or was heavy with home sickness, or was jealous over the position of chief spokesman that now belonged to Paul, it appears he deserted Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas was of a mind to give John Mark another chance to prove himself faithful in persevering in the face of hardships, and no doubt the fact that they were related likewise moved

Barnabas to insist on John Mark joining them. Perhaps Barnabas had seen significant growth in John Mark. Perhaps John Mark had promised he would not desert them again.

2. Whether Barnabas was more moved by regard to his family relationship or more moved by believing the best about John Mark's commitment to persevere regardless of the trials they would face along the way, Paul was not moved at all to have John Mark join them again on this second missionary journey. Paul resisted as strongly in one direction as Barnabas did in the opposite direction. Paul thought it unwise to have someone join them who only 3-4 years ago had abandoned them and the gospel ministry for the comforts of home. For Paul, the rigors and dangers of this missionary journey were not the training ground for young, inexperienced novices; they needed a proven and tried man of godly experience and faithful perseverance who would stay the course regardless of what they may face. There was too much at stake in the work of the Lord to insist upon giving John Mark another chance at this stage of his life. I can see an argument to be made from the side of Barnabas (who sees growth in John Mark and being the son of consolation wants to give him another chance to prove himself), but I can also see an argument to be made from the side of Paul (who sees the importance of the work to require an experienced man of godliness and courage).

3. This was a personal disagreement between two saintly heroes of the early church who had both risked their lives for the Lord Jesus Christ and His truth (Acts 15:26). Neither one was willing to back down. Both were committed to their own personal judgment in this case.

4. This was not a disagreement over doctrine (they both embraced the same apostolic doctrine and held the same Terms of Communion). This was not a disagreement over mere preferences (otherwise they would have sacrificed those preferences to move beyond this disagreement). This was a disagreement over a decision with serious consequences to their ministry as to the practical qualifications of John Mark to accompany them.

a. This is likewise a decision that ministers and elders are called to make many times with regard to candidates for office in the church (it is not always their orthodoxy that is the issue, or their ability to teach and preach, or their faithfulness in their marriage, but it may be whether there is evidence of their constancy, their patience, their love for the brethren, their steadfastness in the face of opposition and hardships in the ministry).

b. It is fairly typical for young men to have a rather rosy and idealistic perception of the ministry, forgetting the fact that to be a faithful minister or a steadfast elder is like painting a bullseye on your backside for the world and even the church to use as target practice. Sometimes it means young men will resent you, leave you, and find a church that will ordain them over a decision to delay or to abstain.

c. Dear ones, no doubt all faithful ministers and elders still have much room in which to grow once they are ordained to office, but knowing the ups and down of the ministry, we must seek to draw the curtains back and expose any romantic ideas any man has about serving in an office of the church. Dear ones, this is not intended to discourage any of you men from aspiring to office in the church, it is intended to caution you to approach it with the reverence, diligence, faithfulness, and perseverance you will need in order that you do not abandon those who look to you for strength, courage, godliness under pressure, and perseverance even when you feel like giving up. Men must first be proven and tried before they are thrust into the blessings and the unique trials of the ministry ("and let these also first be proved" 1 Timothy 3:10). This was the content of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas.

II. The Result of the Personal Disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39-41).

A. The first result of this personal disagreement was that a sharp contention (*paroxusmos* i.e. paroxysm in English), not a mild disagreement that divided them. Here is an emotional or verbal outburst from

these heroes of the faith toward one another. Their emotions got the better of them in this disagreement. On the one hand, we know Paul and Barnabas were men of like passions with us (Acts 14:15). However, on the other hand, we tend to put these men on such a pedestal that we may overlook their sins or weaknesses (Paul doesn't hide his temptations in Romans 7 struggles against sexual lust or concupiscence). I certainly do not rejoice in this division between Paul and Barnabas, but I do rejoice to know that I am not alone in keeping my emotions under the control of the Holy Spirit (the fruit of temperance or self-control). So let us not minimize what happened here—it was a hot, emotional, verbal personal disagreement between two godly apostles in the New Testament Church. It was not a disagreement about doctrine. It was not a disagreement over an immoral life. It was a personal disagreement over an important practical decision of who would join them in their missionary team. And wow did they disagree!

B. The second result of this strong personal disagreement was that neither Paul nor Barnabas would back away from their strong views on the subject, and so they were divided and each went his separate way—Barnabas taking Mark with him to Cyprus, and Paul taking Silas (tried and proven) with him through Syria, Cilicia, and the cities of Galatia—Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium (Acts 15:39-40). The Church of Antioch (likely through its Presbytery) recommended Paul and Silas to the grace of God in their next missionary trip (Acts 15:40). Here seems to be an official action taken to deliver Paul and Silas unto God as appointed servants to their field of ministry. But no mention is made of Barnabas and Mark being so recommended, and no further mention of Barnabas is made in the rest of Acts. Paul's ministry is primarily in the spotlight from this point on in the Book of Acts, while the ministry of Barnabas fades from view in Scripture.

C. What might we glean for our lives from this account?

1. Sharp personal disagreements might come even among godly and mature Christians and leaders over which course of action might be best and most profitable under the circumstances (when the options are not sinful in themselves). However, before they become divisive in sending brethren in opposite directions (1) carefully and prayerfully weigh the options; (2) earnestly pray for peace; (3) control the emotions and words—don't get defensive; (4) speak the truth in love; (5) if the options are not sinful in themselves, is it possible to reach a compromise? Is it my way or the highway? Must I always be right? Must I be in control? (6) If sinful anger, resentment, or bitter words have been spoken, don't wait to humbly repent and seek forgiveness. The longer the wait the more likely that resentment and bitterness will grow. The best of men are men at best. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:6 (some 4 or 5 years later) indicate that Paul and Barnabas were reconciled and enjoyed brotherly fellowship.

2. Though Paul was recommended by the Church of Antioch, Barnabas did not go off to start his own independent church separate from the Apostolic Churches (nor is this an example of toleration of doctrine, worship, or church government contrary to Scripture or sound Confessions of Faith). Barnabas maintained the unity of the Christ's Church in one doctrine, worship, and church government, and he continued his work of building the same Apostolic Church that Paul was likewise building. Though Paul would seem to have the limelight, Barnabas did not become defensive and tear down the work of Paul. Many people leave churches over damaged relationships rather than over unsound doctrine and corrupt worship. This ought not to be. Our commitment to Christ and His truth ought to be more important to us than any personal relationship that has been damaged.

3. Family relationships within the church may cloud our thinking in doing what is right or what is best when conflicts and disagreements arise in the church (as may have happened here with Barnabas and John Mark). Will blood be thicker than what is best? Will blood be more influential than the truth? Will loyalty to family be stronger than loyalty to Christ and His truth?

4. Although the enemy designed to destroy the effective service of Paul and Barnabas by way of this sharp contention, God designed it to increase the spread of the gospel two-fold by Paul and Silas

going one direction of service in the same Church and Barnabas and Mark going in a different direction of service in the same Church. Though I am almost brought to tears by this division between two great men of God, I am lifted up in hope and comfort that my God is so great and mighty that He even works such divisions out for the good of those who love Him and are the called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). Satan tried to bring a rift and what happened? Instead of one missionary team he had two.

5. Mark whom Paul believed was not ready to join their team for lack of maturity or experience or perseverance became a very able and capable minister of Jesus Christ. The story does not end with the division we see in Acts 15. Paul commends Barnabas (1 Corinthians 9:6) and finds Mark to be a profitable minister (2 Timothy 4:11). Can you fail and yet be used by the Lord? No Christian is beyond recovery. If you have fallen, here is hope for your recovery and usefulness in Christ's kingdom. Never give up. This is the same Mark that the Holy Spirit used to give us the Gospel of Mark. What an encouragement that out of conflict and disagreement, God is able to teach us, to train us, and to use us.

Copyright 2017 Greg L. Price.