

## Stubborn Servants . . . Second Chances

Acts 15:36-41

### Introduction

We recently completed a study of the great decision made by the Jerusalem council in Acts, chapter 15, as we continue to make our way through the study of the Bible. The decision of the Jerusalem council ultimately protected the definition of a pure gospel; that is, a gospel free from the necessity of works or rituals; a gospel that clearly declares, “Faith in Christ alone brings salvation.”

As we learned, this issue had deeply divided the church. In fact, division over the value of circumcision for Gentile believers would continue to be a point of contention throughout the remainder of the first century.

By the time we arrive at the epistle of Galatians, the Jews who desired to add Mosaic Law to New Testament grace had formed an established denomination called, “The Party of the Circumcised.” They would be a thorn in Paul’s side throughout his entire ministry, as well as a constant threat to the new believers who were leaving Judaism by the thousands and entering the body of Christ through the gospel of grace.

Now, at the conclusion of chapter 15, we find a shocking development. This, however, is not about religious controversy, but personal controversy. And, believe it or not, the personal controversy is between Paul and Barnabas.

Paul and Barnabas were two men who had spent the last two years traveling together, teaching together, and risking their lives together. These very men, who had stood together to preserve the unity of the church, are now deeply divided and embroiled over a divisive issue.

### Observations on Disagreement

Before we launch into the text, let us make a few observations about disagreement.

#### **There is not any way to avoid disagreement in the church**

1. First, there is not any way to avoid disagreement in the church.

I collected a number of questions that reveal a few of the issues that become sore spots of division in churches today. They include:

- Should music in a worship service be mellow or upbeat?
- Should you sing from the hymnal or use an overhead?
- What instruments are allowable in a worship service? Organ? Organ and piano? Drums, keyboards, and saxophone, along with the organ and piano?
- Is it okay to sing music composed in the last twenty years, or is it, “the older the music the more sacred”?
- Can a person sing in the choir who is not a church member? Can a person sing a solo who is not in the choir? Should the choir members wear robes? If so, what color?
- Should the Sunday school curriculum be the same for each class or can teachers choose topics?
- Should the adult classes be divided by age or topic or both?

- Should the Sunday school meet before the worship service or after?
- Should a church have adult Sunday school or one longer service?
- Should offerings be taken in Sunday school? If so, should the money be used for Sunday school materials only or budget needs or both?
- Should people being baptized wear robes or casual clothes? If robes, should the color be white or can they be another color?
- Should churches build buildings, rent public buildings, or meet in homes? If building a building, which building should be built first – the multi-purpose building or a sanctuary?
- How should the building be financed? Should you borrow money, sell bonds, or pay as you go with cash? If it is cash only, what method of fundraising is to be employed? Can outside organizations help?
- Should missionaries be supported for certain terms or for life?
- Should missionaries be given inflationary raises or should the amount of money remain the same?
- Should church planting missionaries take precedent over other medical missions?
- Should an offering be taken in church by passing offering plates or placing a box in the back of the sanctuary or neither?
- Should people simply pledge their annual giving and mail it in whenever they choose?
- Is it more spiritual to drive a Ford or a Chevy pickup truck?
- Why aren't there more pastors courageous enough to give the answer - Chevy?

The last two questions were for fun, but the others were not. Different opinions abound about everything imaginable!

That is why I have, hanging in my office, a little plaque that reads, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there will be disagreement as to what the Bible teaches."

You need to understand that disagreement in the church is part of the church. This is true in the same way that disagreement in your own family is part of the family. It is inevitable.

I was sent a copy of some letters that six and seven year old children had written to God. Let me read a couple of them to you.

- A little girl wrote,  
*Dear God, I bet it is very hard for You to love everybody in the whole world – there are only four people in my family and I just can't do it.*
- A little boy wrote,  
*Dear Lord, maybe Cain and Abel wouldn't have killed each other so much if they had had their own rooms . . . it worked for me and my brother.*

Disagreements are a part of life. To be a member of a family or a church without them would make you reach for a pulse. It is proof of life!

That leads me to the second observation about disagreement.

**When dealing with disagreement in the church, the way in which the issue is handled is just as important as the issue itself**

2. Secondly, when dealing with disagreement in the church, the way in which the issue is handled is just as important as issue itself.

Look at I Corinthians, chapter 11, verses 17 through 19.

*But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions ["schism" (σχισμα) in the Greek] exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you [factions or heresies, "haireisis" (αἵρεσις) in the Greek]. . .*

(Paul now changes the word, which can be translated "different opinions," so, why is it, Paul, that you think there must be different opinions?),

*. . . so that those who are approved may become evident among you.*

In other words, in the midst of a church disagreement, keep your eyes and ears open – because people who are qualified for leadership will rise to the occasion and reveal their spiritual maturity and perspective.

Different opinions are necessary, because they expose leadership. And one of the marks of spiritual

leadership is whether you value the other person enough to respect and love them, even if you disagree with their opinion.

So, what you disagree about is certainly important, but equally important is how you disagree; that is, the way in which you handle the disagreement.

### **Disagreement does not automatically nullify opportunity; it may multiply opportunity**

3. Thirdly, disagreement does not automatically nullify opportunity; it may multiply opportunity.

That is exactly what happens in Acts, chapter 15. Let us look there and set the stage for the showdown between two friends who disagreed.

## **Cause for Contention**

Let us try to uncover the few clues we have that reveal how the strong team of Paul and Barnabas ended by going separate ways.

We will start by looking back in Acts, chapter 12. Notice verse 25.

*And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.*

John Mark was the cousin of Barnabas. It was in John Mark's home that the early Jerusalem leaders often met. It was in his home that the prayer meeting for Peter's release from prison was held. You may remember our study of that passage and the way in which Rhoda, the servant girl, announced to the church prayer meeting that Peter was standing at the door.

So, John Mark had a wonderful opportunity to meet with and to pray with the early Jerusalem leaders and church members. He evidently stood out above the rest of the young men, because he was chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.

### **Acts 13:13 – John Mark, Barnabas's cousin, deserted the missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas and walked away from the faith**

Now turn to Acts 13, chapter 13, and look at verse 13.

*Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in*

*Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem.*

The word "returned" is a nice word. Paul will later, in chapter 15, refer to that return as "desertion". In fact, the word used by Paul is the Greek word which gives us the transliterated word "apostasy"! John Mark walked away from the faith!

### **Galatians 2:13 – Barnabas had to be reprimanded for hypocrisy by Paul**

Perhaps there was one other subtle thing going on in the back of Paul's mind as well. Turn ahead to Galatians, chapter 2, and look at verse 13.

This is the passage where Paul had to rebuke Peter for his hypocrisy before the Gentile believers. Peter withdrew from eating with the Gentiles when some prominent Jewish leaders arrived from Jerusalem. But notice, in verse 13, that Peter was not the only hypocrite in the crowd.

*The rest of the Jews joined him [Peter] in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.*

While Barnabas later regained his balance and ultimately stood with Paul before the Jewish church in defense of the Gentiles, could it be that the wounds had not fully healed? Barnabas left Paul standing out in the cold. Paul had to deal with that hypocrisy without the benefit of his partner. Perhaps Paul was still bothered by Barnabas' failure at Antioch.

### **Contention between Paul and Barnabas**

With that as the background and introduction to this shocking development, let us now go to the actual events that led to the personal controversy between Paul and his good friend Barnabas.

Turn to Acts, chapter 15, and look at verses 36 through 38.

*After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.*

I tried to climb back into this first century scene and listen in on their discussion that later turned into frank, sharp disagreement. I can almost hear

Barnabas saying, “Now listen, Paul, my cousin John Mark wants to go along with us. I want to give him another chance and take him with us.”

I can hear Paul responding, “John Mark . . . God forbid! That young man left us in the lurch. He couldn’t be counted on then, and he can’t be counted on now.”

“Now Paul, if you remember, I gave you a chance by going and pulling you out of Tarsus and bringing you to Antioch to teach with me. I risked everything to give you another chance. If anyone should be forgiving, it’s you, the former Saul of Tarsus.”

“No, no, Barnabas, don’t use me as an example. I never walked away from the work of God. In fact, didn’t Jesus Christ Himself say that if a man puts his hand to the plow and then looks back, he isn’t fit for the kingdom of God?”

“Hey, don’t quote scripture at me. And don’t imply my cousin’s not going to heaven. You’re just being stubborn, Paul.”

“Stubborn? Ha! You wouldn’t even think of giving him another chance if he weren’t your cousin.”

“Well, cousin or no cousin, I say he goes with us . . . and he’ll do just as good a job as anybody.”

“You just won’t admit it Barnabas, your cousin is a quitter! I say he stays.”

“He is not a quitter, and I say he goes. . .”

“He stays . . .”

“He goes . . . and if he doesn’t go, Paul, then I’m not going.”

“Well then, don’t go!”

You might ask, “Stephen, they didn’t really argue did they? I mean, show a little respect – we are talking about the great apostle.”

I am not being disrespectful. In fact, I am respecting one of the greatest proofs of inspiration; that is, the fact that the scriptures did not hide the failures of its heroes.

If you look at verse 39a, in fact, you will see just how bad it got!

*And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another . . .*

The word translated “disagreement” can be translated, “contention” – they were in “sharp contention”. The word refers to strong emotion.

There was no compromising with either man; no negotiating. It was a matter of principle with Barnabas and a matter of principle with Paul.

Ladies and gentlemen, they were both wrong and yet, in the providence of God, they were both right.

Paul believed John Mark was unreliable. And when you are going into the thick of the fight, you need someone who will not break down under fire.

As Proverbs, chapter 25, verse 19, says,

*Like a bad tooth and an unsteady foot is confidence in a faithless man in time of trouble.*

However, Barnabas longed for the best in his cousin. He felt certain that John Mark had repented and this was the time to use him in battle again.

## From One Team to Another

We are given the end result of this disagreement between Paul and Barnabas in verses 39b through 41 of Acts, chapter 15.

*. . . and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*

In the ways of God, there is the creation of two teams now, instead of one. They will have two different ways of doing things, no doubt, but there will be two advances of the gospel into the mission fields of the world.

By the way, with these closing verses, Barnabas sails off the story line of the New Testament. While he is mentioned again by Paul in a few places later on, we never hear of any of his work or ministry. Legend has it that Barnabas was killed by an angry mob that he was trying to reach with the gospel.

## A Second Chance for John Mark

Barnabas’ refusal to give up on John Mark finally paid off, evidently long after Barnabas was killed. Note the progression in the New Testament of his young cousin.

### Acts 15:39 – John Mark sails to Cyprus with Barnabas

In Acts, chapter 15, verse 39, John Mark sails away with Barnabas to Cyprus, smarting from the fact that Paul rejected him. Would it make him bitter; angry; resentful? After all, the leading

missionary tagged him as a failure for life! No, as we will see, he evidently kept the path open for Paul to travel back to him, if he ever chose to do so.

### **Colossians 4:10 – Paul instructs the Colossians to welcome John Mark**

Paul finally chose to do so in a public way. In a letter bound for the Christians in Colossae, Paul's epistle to the Colossians, he wrote, in chapter 4, verse 10,

*Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also Barnabas's cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him);*

Eighteen years after the events of Acts, chapter 15, Paul has evidently changed, and so has John Mark!

### **II Timothy 4:11 – John Mark is useful to Paul for service**

In addition, in II Timothy, chapter 4, verse 11b, Paul is giving his last instructions to Timothy. In the last letter he would write, Paul told Timothy to go by on his way to Rome and,

*. . . Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service.*

It seems that in his dying breath, Paul sought to set the record straight. By this time, the church had read the book of Acts and knew the story of John Mark's defection. They did not know whether he could be trusted. Paul makes sure they know that John Mark was worthy of a second chance; he had become precious to Paul in ministry.

### **The Gospel of Mark – written by John Mark**

Was Barnabas right? Oh yes! The fruit of his decision is seen every time you open your Bible to the gospel of Mark – the gospel written by Barnabas's cousin, John Mark.

### **I Peter 5:13 – Peter calls John Mark his spiritual son**

Finally, I Peter, chapter 5, verse 13, gives us the last mention of John Mark. In this passage we discover that Peter calls John Mark his spiritual son,

*. . . my son, Mark.*

Just as Paul had adopted Timothy as his young disciple, so Peter had adopted Mark. The apostle who benefited most by a second chance given by God, now disciplined his son in the faith, this son of the second chance.

## **Conclusion**

In the war years, triage, or sorting out, referred to the policy by which medical assistance was given in makeshift hospitals near the front lines. It was up to the medical staff to "color-tag" the wounded, placing them in one of three categories according to their condition. One color-tag meant "hopeless," or that nothing would save the wounded soldier. Another color-tag meant "hopeful," or that the injured soldier would survive whether they received help or not. The third color-tag meant "doubtful," or that the wounded soldier would live if medical assistance was immediately given. Since medical supplies were severely limited, assistance was being given only to this last group.

One soldier, named Lou, was badly blown apart, with one leg severely wounded. The doctor who examined him made the decision that Lou was a hopeless case and tagged him as such, basically leaving him to die. But a nurse noticed Lou was conscious and began to talk with him. They discovered they were both from Ohio. Getting to know Lou as a person, the nurse just could not let him die. She slipped into the ward one night and, risking her job, broke all the rules and changed his color-tag from "hopeless" to "doubtful". Because of that, Lou was taken in the back of a truck to a better medical facility where he spent several months. He recovered and, even minus one leg, he led a full life. This was all because a nurse broke the rules of triage, changed his tag, and gave him another chance to live.

Perhaps the task of the church is to go around and change the tags.

Perhaps today, you need your tag changed – from unbeliever to believer.

Perhaps today, you need to change a tag that you have put on something – something you have tagged as hopeless; someone you have tagged as unreachable; some past event you have marked as unforgivable; some deed done to you that you have tagged as unforgettable.

For those of you who have placed your faith in Christ, perhaps you need to ask God to provide immediate assistance; to change your tag and perform surgery on your heart; to change the way your tag reads:

- from nominal believer to committed believer;
- from prayer-less Christian to prayer partner;
- from stingy believer to generous giver;
- from uninvolved church attendee to selfless servant.

Take it from a failure that even the great apostle Paul had tagged as “hopeless”; take it from another

apostle, Barnabas, who knew what second chances were all about, and learn something about the Lord; learn something about grace. Learn that even though the Lord has to deal with stubborn servants, He is available to give you, and every other child of His, another chance to serve Him well.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/28/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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