

Disagreement of Paul and Barnabas – ACTS 15:36-41

Following on from the confusion and subsequent clarification by the Jerusalem leaders about how to deal with the Gentiles in the growing Church, Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch to continue their ministry. But a moment comes when Paul expresses a desire for return visits to the places they'd been on their first missionary journey. Barnabas is all for this, but the crunch comes in the choice of helper. Seemingly a minor matter compared to the purpose of the trip.

So, what's the issue we see in this passage?

The ministry of Paul and Barnabas was a shared one and so the choice of helper might have thought a quick decision. We aren't clear on the reasons, but Barnabas' expectation of helper brings out Paul's opinion of John's actions in leaving them on the first journey.

Why John left, we don't know. Whatever the reason it was enough for Paul to have felt abandoned and left thinking that he couldn't trust John in future endeavours. This was clearly different for Barnabas and seemed to be more forgiving.

It seems though that the issue was not focused around a difference on the fundamentals of faith, a moral failure, or the type of ministry – rather around a principle of character. Each had their emphasis and they weren't willing to compromise. So, Paul and Barnabas chose to part company – Barnabas trusting and taking John and going back to Cyprus; Paul taking Silas – someone he recognises he can partner with. There is no mention of who was in the right in the disagreement, and the issue is clearly not enough for the church to not commend a further journey.

It appears though that Paul does not hold a grudge and later in his letters to various churches, he refers to both John and Barnabas as people who are of great comfort and encouragement to him. People that he trusts and that he commends to others. (Colossians 4:10/1 Corinthians 9:6/2 Timothy 4:11). So, relationship has clearly been maintained and likely strengthened over time. The result of the parting of ways is 2 missionary campaigns happening at the same time. Neither is wrong but rather different in personnel and style and so the gospel is spreading further than might have been with just the one group. God is still at work in spite of the human failings of Paul and Barnabas.

What's the learning? Below are a range of thoughts to consider for yourself.

- Disagreement is a natural part of life. As fallen human beings we are susceptible and fall prey to this. Plenty of Scriptures reference argument e.g. Proverbs 20:3, Philippians 2:14-15; 2 Timothy 2:23-24
- What does it look like to pause and consider next steps instead of reacting immediately?
- How we interact with each other sends a message to others. What do young people learn? What is the witness

that is shown to those who don't believe? *"If you mess up the relational level, people won't care about your content."* (Tim Muehlhoff). You may still disagree, but the way you treat each other will be what is remembered and what will influence another's willingness for ongoing association with you.

- If relationship is broken and people walk away from the Lord because of it, the enemy is having a blast. Our posture should be that we do everything we can to shut that down!
- How someone reacts in disagreement, may be due to unspoken and unknown matters behind the scenes. I wonder if Barnabas had any previous idea how Paul had been feeling about John's abandonment of them in Perga?
- Whilst they may well have been frustrated, imagine if Paul or Barnabas had spoken badly of each other? The church may not have commended Paul's next journey, any hope of reconciliation may have been far less likely, the effectiveness of their ministries would have been void and the witness for Christ tarnished. We don't have to agree but do need to be gentle, respectful, sympathetic and humble, being prepared to see the good in others instead of writing them off. (1 Peter 3:9,15). As Christians how do we show a different way in our responses?
- Are we willing to be wrong? In listening and learning it is possible our perspective may change even a little.
- Consider recent global issues - Covid, politics, Israel-Palestine, Ukraine-Russia, Treaty of Waitangi, lifestyle differences etc. *"If you do/believe this, then you devalue/dismiss me, are a bigot, racist etc."* Language can be very black & white language laced with judgement, but not everything is that clear cut.
- Are we clear on what convictions we do have and why or are we following a trend of thought?
- There is room in God's big family for a whole bunch of style.
- But when we remove the 'me' from the issue and consider God, we see things with different eyes, and He is more likely to be evident.
- How do I pray for and bless those with whom I disagree? Pray into their lives, their relationship with God, their family and context.

Paul and Barnabas chose to part company for the sake of the work. And sometimes there is space for a new partnership. What might it have meant for John to be given another opportunity? What about Silas – to minister in a way he wouldn't have if he'd not met Paul? Disagreement does not have to mean broken relationship, but it may change it into something more suited for a next phase. This seems to be how it played out for Paul and Barnabas.

But there may be times when we do need to step away from a situation:

- To step out of any clear abuse and toxicity



- To free ourselves from angst and stress of ongoing disagreement
- To allow others to thrive
- To allow the work of God to be released in new ways
- To usher in a new partnership/stage of work or ministry with fresh ideas and perspectives.

But how we step out is crucial and takes wisdom and support and ongoing relationship is very possible.

The work of God did not fall apart through Paul and Barnabas' disagreement. It could be said it was strengthened but I suggest that this was the case because of their characters and maturity of faith and their willingness to maintain relationship and even revise perspectives.

The responsibility is approach to disagreement starts with me so that God is glorified.

REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to ensure I submit to Christ in all my actions and reactions – will He be glorified through my words and behaviours?
2. How do I pray for and bless those with whom I disagree? What might be some practical steps of blessing?
3. How do you react to the quote *“If you mess up the relational level, people won't care about your content”*?
4. What stops me admitting I may be wrong?
5. Consider a time when you had to walk away from a situation/part company with someone/s. What lessons were there and how has God worked in you through that situation?



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