

Dealing with Disagreement – Acts 15:36-41

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Utopia !*

1. In the early 19th Century, several trends came together to produce a movement that believed it was possible to establish Utopia on Earth.
 - a. The perfect society; a community of harmony & peace,
 - b. Where good-will would flow unhindered between all.
2. Several groups decided to turn their dream of Utopia into reality and founded townships governed by their vision of the perfect community.
3. **Brook Farm** near Boston was one.
 - a. Founded in 1841 on 200 acres, it had several famous people associated with it, including, Ralph Waldo Emerson, & Nathaniel Hawthorne.
 - b. Just 6 years after its origin, Brook Farm folded when its members became embroiled in a dispute they couldn't resolve.
4. **New Harmony** in Indiana began in 1825 but folded 3 years later due to internal dissension.
5. A utopian group known as the Icarians began a community in Texas in 1848.
 - a. Just a year later, the leaders split, with the majority of the group moving to Nauvoo, Illinois where they made another attempt, sure they'd removed the contrary elements.
 - b. 6 years later, when the members had another falling out, the community split again, with the dissenters moving away to start another, purer version of Utopia.
 - c. That community met its end 8 years later – ripped apart by competing visions of Utopia.

B. *We're Different*

1. The founding commitment in all these attempts at the perfect community was: “We *will* get along!”
2. But despite their best intentions, vows & oaths—they *couldn't* get along.
3. They couldn't because people are *different*.
 - a. And because of that, sometimes we *disagree*.
 - b. And often when we disagree, *conflict* follows.
4. Anyone who's married knows that you can be madly in love with someone, and they can still drive you crazy!
5. You can love them so fervently, so strongly that you would *die* for them – but sometimes you want to *kill* them!

C. *The Church*

1. As much as we'd prefer the Church to be a utopian community where we all get-along, all the time, in all things, we have to be realistic & remember, this isn't Heaven; this isn't utopia.
2. Heaven is the only place of *perfect harmony*. That's one of the reasons we yearn for it.
3. This side of heaven, because none of us is perfect, we're going to have times when we're at odds with one another.

4. So what we need to do is be wise about it; recognize disagreement *is* going to come, & prepare for *how* to deal with it.
5. That's what this passage teaches us.

II. TEXT

A. V. 36

³⁶ Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing."

1. *At lease* a couple years have passed since Paul & Barnabas' first missionary venture.
2. Concern & curiosity about how the churches they'd planted were doing moved Paul to retrace their route & check up on them.
3. While he was mainly an *evangelist*, here he demonstrates a *pastor's heart*.
4. He was concerned for *how* his spiritual children were doing & wanted to see how he & Barnabas could help.

B. Vs. 37-38

³⁷ Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark.

³⁸ But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work.

1. John Mark was Barnabas' nephew who'd gone with them on their first journey as an *assistant*.
 - a. His task was to *facilitate* Paul & Barnabas in whatever help they needed.
 - b. As they made their way across the island of Cyprus, Paul & Barnabas became more & more dependent on him in their work of planting churches.
2. But when they sailed north & landed in Asia, John Mark bailed, took another ship & went home to Jerusalem.
3. The word Luke used to describe his departure has a strong negative tone. (13:13)
 - a. He *deserted* them; *abandoned* them, leaving them in the lurch. He "flaked out."
 - b. Whatever *his* reasons may have been, they weren't *good* ones.
 - c. By running home he was *breaking a solemn commitment*. His departure *hurt the cause*.

-
4. **Why** John Mark left, we're not told. A few Wednesdays back we ventured some guesses.

a. It's possible he just didn't like to *travel* in other cultures where the food & customs differed so radically.

- 1) Some people prefer the familiar comforts of home.
- 2) Travel sounds *romantic* until they actually get away from home & realize it's not so fun after all.
- 3) John Mark stayed with them through all the island of Cyprus where the culture wasn't too different from his own. In fact, Cyprus was Barnabas' homeland.

- 4) But Asia was a completely different scene with new foods & customs that would pose a great challenge to anyone who doesn't like change.
- 5) So maybe JM just said, "I can't **handle** this anymore," & went home.
- b. Maybe after being away from Jerusalem for months, he was simply **homesick**.
- 1) I'll never forget my first Summer camp.
 - 2) It lasted a week, but after only 2 days I was so homesick, I cried.
- c. It could be that **opposition** to the Gospel that had been growing stirred up **fear in him**.
- 1) Cyprus had a large Jewish population, where they could expect a reasonable hearing as they preached the Gospel.
 - 2) But Asia was a wild, dangerous region where Jews were few. This was the Gentile world, something John Mark had been groomed since a child to abhor.
 - 3) So it's possible he got cold feet & decided to head home.
- d. Another possibility for why he deserted is **hinted** at in the **controversy** that followed Paul & Barnabas' return from their 1st journey.
- 1) **Remember**, teachers came from Jerusalem to Antioch saying Gentiles had to become law-abiding Jews in order to follow Jesus.
 - 2) Paul's **argument** with them was **fierce** & led to the Jerusalem Council we spent 2 weeks looking.
 - 3) It's possible the reason John Mark left them was because he **disagreed** with Paul's methods in preaching to Gentiles.
- e. It may have been a number of these **working together**.
- f. Whatever the reason for his abandoning them – it was **lame**.
-
5. Now that they're headed back out on the road, when Barnabas says he wants to bring his nephew along, Paul say, "No way! Ain't happenin'!"
6. Notice how Luke describes it: Barnabas was **determined** & Paul **insisted**;
- a. Both men were **settled in their decision** about John Mark.
 - b. Barnabas was taking him, Paul wasn't. It was an **impasse**.
 - c. There wasn't going to be a meeting of the minds or compromise on this.
 - d. Both believed he was **right** & remained adamant; parked on his judgment about what to do.
-
7. As John Mark's **uncle**, Barnabas had the **loyalty** thing working in him.
8. But more importantly, **everything** we know about Barnabas tells us he was a **people-person**.
- a. He **specialized** in taking **rejects & difficult people** & by committing himself to them turned them from **trash into trophies** of God's grace.
 - b. Barnabas was his **nickname** – it means, **Son of Encouragement**.
 - c. His real name was **Joseph**, but all knew him by his stand-out virtue of being an encourager of the down-trodden, a consoler of those who'd failed.
9. His **greatest reclamation project** was Paul himself.
- a. When Paul first came to faith, the church of Jerusalem wouldn't touch him.
 - b. He'd been the **infamous Saul** who led the persecution of the church & presided at the execution of Stephen.

- c. They thought Paul was *faking his conversion* so he could infiltrate the Church & gather intelligence on them.
 - d. It was Barnabas who risked befriending him, then introduced him to the Apostles.
 - c. Once accepted by the Church, Paul began to *preach boldly*, which led to a new round of persecution.
 - d. So the church leaders sent Paul home to Tarsus, *far North*, where he remained for months, cooling his heels.
 - e. When revival broke out in Antioch, Barnabas realized the rapidly growing church needed solid teachers & went to Tarsus to fetch Paul.
 - f. Returning to Antioch, the 2 friends became the core of the leadership there.
10. Barnabas' great gift was his ability to see the God-given *potential* in others, even when it was covered by a rough exterior.
- a. He didn't write people off when they messed up; he gave them another chance.
 - b. He didn't see failure as a disqualifier, but as an *opportunity to overcome* thru the grace of God.
 - c. Because he knew he'd *received great grace*, he *showed* it to others.
11. He deemed John Mark *ready* for another trip, sensing *this time he'd succeed* where before he'd failed.
12. From Barnabas' perspective, the trip was *more about reclaiming something* in & for his nephew than the work to be done in the places they'd visit.
13. *Paul* looked at this 2nd journey from the perspective of the *work to be done*.
- a. He wanted a strong team to *do work*, not one that *needed it*.
 - b. There was a lot of ground to cover & many people to minister to.
 - c. It would require the mature, strong, & committed to get it done & he had no confidence in John Mark.
-
14. Now → It wasn't that Barnabas was right & Paul was wrong, or vice versa.
- a. Both viewpoints were valid because each had *different objectives*.
 - b. Paul said, "What can John Mark do for God's work?"
 - c. Barnabas said, "What can God's work do for John Mark?"
15. A problem arose, *as it always does*, when you have *2 leaders* with equal authority but their *visions clash*.

C. Vs. 39-41

³⁹ Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

- 1. It hurts to see these 2 incredibly godly men fall out with one another.
 - a. They were good friends who'd spent *years* working side by side.
 - b. At Lystra, they'd faced a murderous mob together.
 - c. They were brothers in battle, comrades in arms for the sake of the Gospel.
- 2. But here they are, arguing over something as small as the members of their team.

- a. For both men, it was an issue of *principle*, though each camped on a *different* one.
 - b. Paul considered the *integrity of the work* –
 - c. Barnabas focused on the *integrity of relationship*.
-
3. Who was right? Who ought to have given in here?
 4. *Neither* – they were *both right*; because they were driven by *different objectives, visions*.
 5. You see - when we read on & consider the *result* of their split, we realize *God was leading* them to this.
 6. It was their tenacious hold on what *they'd grown accustomed to* that resulted in this less than amiable parting.
 7. This split *doubled* their outreach.
 - a. Not 1, but 2 teams went out, covering *twice* as much territory.
 - b. Barnabas & John Mark returned to Cyprus where together they ended up planting churches all over the island.
 - c. God wanted Paul to take Silas & traveled through Asia & on over into Greece where Silas would prove to be far more effective than Barnabas would have been.
-
8. This is what the Lord had intended all along.
 - a. Paul was to carry on his *missionary work* while Barnabas was to *restore John Mark*.
 - b. Though Paul *wrote John Mark off*, Barnabas' investment in him *paid off* & he *was* turned around.
 - c. In writing his *last letter*, his execution imminent, Paul told Timothy to send John Mark to come be with him.
 - d. *That's quite a turn around*. John Mark had become so dear to Paul that of all the people he could have asked to be with him for his final hours, it was this young man he'd earlier written off as a loss.
 - e. But in the end, he says John Mark is *very profitable* for the Kingdom & a personal comfort.
 9. *History* tells us John Mark was *Peter's companion* when he was imprisoned in Rome & that it was during this time Peter recounted to John Mark the story of Jesus' life that became the *Second Gospel*.
 - a. How impoverished our understanding of Jesus would be if not for the Gospel of Mark?
 - b. How thankful we can be Barnabas didn't give up on him but gave him another chance.
-
10. Looking back, it's clear → Paul & Barnabas were *supposed to split up* at this point.
 - a. The problem arose from the fact that they'd grown so *comfortable* with the idea of their being a team they never stopped to ask the Spirit if it was time to go their separate ways.
 - b. The Spirit had sent them out *together* on their *first journey*.
 - c. They *assumed* the same direction applied to this *second journey*.
 11. It took a *disagreement over John Mark* to accomplish God's will for them.
-

D. Guzik & I

1. 25 years ago when we started CC, I approached David Guzik who was teaching a Thursday night bible study in Ventura & asked him if he wanted to help us start a work in Oxnard.
2. We had a Wednesday evening study in Oxnard, so we put the 2 studies together & started Sunday services in Bolker Park in PH.
3. In those early years, we *co-pastored*; alternating teaching through books of the Bible.
4. This went on for 5 years & God blessed. David is a great teacher & the flock grew slowly in numbers but rapidly in maturity.
5. We moved to the Oxnard Performing Arts center, then to Oxnard College.
6. After 5 years, it became clear that *differing visions* were taking shape in us.
 - a. David wanted to go in one direction, while I sensed a leading in another.
 - b. *Looking back*, David & I now realize we were *both right* – God was giving us different visions because it was time to split up & *double our effectiveness* for the Kingdom.
 - c. The problem was that we allowed our *past relationship as co-pastors* to define our understanding of when & how we were to minister.
 - d. Each of us got it into our heads that the pastorate of CCO was a prize to *compete* for.
 - e. If you know anything about men & competition you know when the stakes are high, friendships can be strained.
 - f. There were times of stress between David & I; the good fun & companionship that had marked our past was put to the test. We didn't talk with each other much for a while.
7. After 10 months the Guzik's, along with several from CCO went out to start CCSV – which was a solid work under David's leadership.
8. And look at what God has done here.
9. Looking back, both David & I scratch our heads at how we missed the *obviousness* of what God was doing back then in splitting us up.
 - a. The mystery is how we got so *sideways* with each other over how the separation came about.
 - b. We both admit our error was failing to be open to the Spirit about *what* He was doing.
 - c. Now we see it clearly – & rejoice!
 - d. Today, David is the director of the Bible College in Seigen, Germany & in May of this year, I'll be speaking at the European Pastor's Conference which David is hosting.

III. CONCLUSION

A. *Walking Together*

1. What makes the split between Paul & Barnabas unnerving is its *setting* against the backdrop of the Jerusalem Council where the Church went to such lengths to *protect the unity* of the Body of Christ.
2. By placing this story so close to that *the Holy Spirit intends us to understand* that *unity* doesn't mean *uniformity* – where all of us are *identical* in all our opinions, views, values, & priorities.
 - a. *Unity* means we all agree on the *essentials of the Gospel* & that we love,

- honor, & respect one another even when we *disagree* on non-essentials, or in our opinions, and views on whatever.
- b. **Uniformity** is where we all have to *look & sound alike*, all have the same *tastes*, the same *opinions*, the same *views* on every little thing.
 - c. Uniformity is *cookie-cutter Christianity*, where when a person gets saved,
 - they wear the same *uniform*,
 - adopt the same *vocabulary*,
 - embrace the same *political views*,
 - go to the same *movies*,
 - read the same *magazines*,
 - watch the same *TV shows*,
 - listen to the same *radio station*,
 - & root for the same *team*.
 - d. Uniformity was what the Judaizers said Gentiles needed to practice if they wanted to be saved, & it's what the Jerusalem Council *rejected!*
3. Unity is **NOT** Uniformity.
 4. Which means, as we *walk together* in Christ, growing in grace, & being led by the Spirit to our *differing* lives & ministries, there are going to be times when we're **NOT** going to agree.
 5. We must recognize *ahead of time* that differences *are* going to arise & when they do, *unity*, not uniformity, must prevail.

B. What To Do When Differences Arise

1. When differences arise among us, we must ask ourselves, "**How important is this—really?**"
 - a. Is this an *essential* of the faith or mere opinion? There can be no negotiating the essentials.
 - b. But if it's merely a *preference* or *opinion*, don't let it drive a wedge between you.
 - c. *Agree to disagree*, but love, honor & respect at all times!
2. When we love our opinions more than one another, we err.
3. Love & respect for those we *disagree with* stands out as all the more attractive precisely *because* of our differences.
4. Consider this: Look at the young men Jesus called as disciples. They were about as diverse a lot as you could find.
 - a. Simon was an ultra-nationalistic zealot who fought against the Romans & *loathed* collaborators.
 - b. Matthew was a tax-collector who was about as thick with the Romans as a Jew could get.
 - c. To put this in modern terms, Simon & Matthew would have been even less inclined to love & work with one another than Newt Gingrich & Nancy Pelosi, George Bush & Al Gore, Bill Gates & Steve Jobs, Simon Cowell & Ryan Seacrest, Bill O'Reily & Rosie O'Donnell.
5. But Simon's & Matthew's devotion to Christ radically altered their relationship.
6. Sworn enemies became brothers, whose *love* for one another *trumped* any

differences & whose *respect* for each other wasn't diminished by disagreement.