

Pressing Through Conflict for the Kingdom

Acts 15:36-16:5

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.” **37** Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. **38** But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. **39** And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, **40** but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. **41** And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Timothy Joins Paul and Silas

Paul¹ came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. **2** He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. **3** Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. **4** As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. **5** So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

Sermon Notes

In the last study, we saw the first significant internal conflict in the Church which eventuated in the Jerusalem Council. Now we see a very significant conflict arise between the two foremost missionaries in the Church, Paul and Barnabas. The dispute was over taking John Mark on their second journey. Mark was Barnabas' cousin (Co. 4:10) and he had deserted them on their first journey (Acts 13:13). Barnabas the encourager wanted to give him a second chance, but Paul felt that taking a risk on him would jeopardize the mission. What is most curious about this incident is that Luke does not say that one was right and the other was wrong. Nor does it disrupt the Church or hinder the gospel. In fact, the churches thrive after it occurs. What explains that? I think it is because the focus was on the strengthening of the Church with the Gospel, not on individual rights. When your focus is on leading the Church closer to Christ, even though you disagree with the person next to you over how to get there, you are still moving closer to each other while moving closer to Christ.

How do I know that Paul and Barnabas' disagreement was ultimately concerned with strengthening the Church? Three reasons. First, because the text says that they intended to strengthen the churches (15:41). Secondly, because Luke says that the result was that the churches were strengthened (16:5). And thirdly, because the brothers sent them on their journeys with their blessing (15:40); it is hard to believe the Church would have given its blessing on a mission of spite. Now the question is what are the signs that a disagreement is Kingdom-focused and not self-focused? Our text gives us some clues.

The Supreme Court has been in the news lately, as well as much dissension in our civil discourse. In studying this passage and seeing this on the news, it reminded me of a very uncommon friendship once forged on our Supreme Court between Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsberg.

Scalia died in 2016, but he and Ruth Bader Ginsberg were the closest of friends. At the same time, they represented polar opposite positions on the court. Ginsberg represented the most liberal interpretation of the constitution and Scalia represented the most conservative. Their dissenting opinions when they voted against each other were sometimes very sharp and pointed. However, outside of the court, they and their spouses were close friends, attending the opera together and

traveling the world together. In fact, their friendship is the inspiration for an operatic comedy, and the main song in that comedy is titled, "We Are Different, We Are One," a phrase Ginsberg quoted at Scalia's memorial service.

Scalia was asked once how it was that they loved each other this way. He said, "how could you not love one who is so passionate about the opera? How could you not love Ruth Ginsberg? She has such a bright mind and such a good sense of humor. In fact, there is nothing about her not to love except her view of the law."

In another interview, Scalia was asked what explained their deep friendship despite such sharp disagreement on the law. He said, "It's simple. We are committed to the constitution, and we are committed to the institution of a supreme court." Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsberg were committed to something bigger than themselves.

How is it that Paul and Barnabas remained friends? How is it possible for the gospel to advance through the church even though its two top leaders had a sharp disagreement? It was because they were both committed to the kingdom of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were committed to something infinitely bigger than themselves. They were subjects of King Jesus who had died for them and justified them with his righteousness. How could they come before him with disagreements and self-pity? They could only come before him saying, "we want to do your will. Please lead us forward despite our disagreements."

If you are in love with the kingdom of God and subject to the gospel of Jesus Christ, then you and I will love well through disagreements. Loving well involves speaking, visiting, accommodating, and ultimately reconciling.

I. **Speaking (Act 15:36)**

The first way we can love each other well despite sharp disputes is to continue speaking to one another. Although Paul and Barnabas were at odds over how to resolve this situation, they continued speaking to one another. In addition to that, we see that they continued speaking the gospel to others as well.

Continuing to speak to the one with whom we disagree as well as continuing to speak the gospel to others is the way we love one another well. The opposite of this is, of course, silence. We become silent when we fall into self-pity and passive-aggressiveness. In reality, self-pity is actually self-worship, because it is our way of putting our own desires, hurt feelings, etc. over a reconciled relationship with another person and over the priority of the gospel being preached.

The only way to be free from this type of self-worship is to repeat the gospel to yourself. We must say to ourselves, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (Ro. 5:10).

Speaking is essential to loving one another well in the midst of dispute or disagreement. There are, however, times when it is not helpful for us to speak our mind. To this end, there are five helpful questions we can ask ourselves when deciding whether or not to speak about a particular matter.

- 1) Does this matter pose a risk to the Kingdom of God?
- 2) Does it bring shame on the gospel?
- 3) It is so grave that my conscience would be compromised if I didn't speak?
- 4) Does it cause danger to an organization or a brother or sister?
- 5) Is it so important that it is worth risking the relationship by speaking?

There are times when you will need to simply bear the disagreement because it does not fall under any of these categories. Again, to this point we can remind ourselves of the gospel to enable us to do so. God bears with our sins

II. Visiting (Acts 15:39-41; 16:4-5)

A second sign that one is interested in advancing the gospel is that he proactively engages with other people. Neither Paul nor Barnabas retreated to their studies or hid behind their computer screens or hunkered down with family and friends. They said, "All right we disagree on specific strategy, but our goal to strengthen the churches is still the same. You go that way and I will go this way."

People who disagree over selfish concerns tend to withdraw to narrower and narrower circles. First they might withdraw to a smaller church. Then they have fewer and fewer friends. Then they just have their family. And soon they begin to withdraw even from their family members. People like this forget that the gospel is to be their priority and instead make their personal grievance their priority. Churches which divide for nonessential reasons also tend to get smaller and smaller; their mission changes from advancing the gospel to advancing their particular pet peeve. It is the devil's strategy to cause us to withdraw and nurse wounds. He encourages cutting ourselves off from the means of grace including Christian fellowship as well as evangelism because he knows if he can succeed we will wither from the inside out.

Such was not the case with Paul and Barnabas. They remained positively focused on others. They traveled to these far away places because they wanted to encourage and strengthen other Christians. There is no cure for selfishness like forcing yourself to engage others in order to encourage. And there is no cure for forgetting the gospel like proclaiming it to someone else.

This principle to is instructed and enabled by the gospel, specifically the incarnational principle of the gospel. Jesus came among us in order to save us despite the fact that there was an infinite breach in our relationship with him because of sin. We must do the same with our brothers and sisters. We must show up in their presence and not hide behind email, text messages, or letters.

III. Accommodating (Acts 16:1-3)

A third mark that one is endeavoring to advance the gospel rather than nurse wounds is that he is willing to accommodate himself to others' weaknesses. That is what we see Paul doing when he has Timothy circumcised. He is accommodating to the tender consciences of Jewish Christians. Some think that Paul is acting hypocritically given that he has just thundered against the Judaizers in the Jerusalem Council for requiring circumcision as a condition of salvation. However, this is very different. Paul did not tell Timothy that his circumcision was a condition of salvation; he asked him to be circumcised so as to remove any unnecessary hindrance to the gospel ministry. Timothy presented a slightly different problem in that his father was Greek and his mother was Jewish. Since he had been reared primarily in a Jewish religious culture by his mother, Eunice, his uncircumcised state could have been interpreted as hatred for his Jewish heritage. Neither Paul nor Timothy wanted that. Both loved their Jewish heritage because, after all, salvation had been first revealed through the Jews.

Think, however, what Paul would have been tempted to do. He had "won" at the Jerusalem Council. The Judaizers had been thoroughly defeated. He could have gloated in that victory and further provoked those on the other side by flaunting the fact that his new assistant was an uncircumcised half-Jew. But Paul had no interest in provocation. He only wanted to

strengthen the churches by gospel means. The Church had clarified that circumcision was not a condition for salvation; therefore, Paul was free to have Timothy circumcised as a compassionate gesture toward Jewish brethren who were getting used to this idea that they and the Gentiles were saved in the same way—Christ alone plus nothing else. Paul did not ask Timothy to do anything he was unwilling to do himself. During his third journey, Paul submitted himself to Jewish purification rites before entering the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 21:26). In another book he explains that to the Jew he became a Jew in order to win the Jews (1 Co. 9:20).

In the same way that we do not need to speak in every circumstance, it is also not necessary to accommodate every circumstance either. In the same way that parenting requires some instances of inconsistency in dealing with certain issues, we must accommodate relative to the degree of maturity of others.

IV. Reconciling (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philippians 24; 1 Peter 5:13)

The final way we observe that one is concerned to advance the gospel rather than his own agenda is that he pursues reconciliation. This point does not come from this text but rather from four others (Co. 4:10; 2 Ti. 4:11; Ph. 24; 1 Pt. 5:13), which reveal that Paul eventually came to embrace John Mark as a co-laborer in the gospel. While we do not have an account of how Paul and Mark's relationship was restored, we have the evidence that it was in Paul's comments about this young man. In Colossians and Philemon we have evidence that they were talking to each other because Paul relays Mark's greetings. In Second Timothy we hear Paul's desire to visit with Mark and even humbles himself to the point of saying that Mark was "helpful" to him. Finally, in First Peter we read that Mark becomes so highly regarded in the Church that Peter can refer to him as his own "son."

Do you hear all the points this text has taught? After the disagreement with Barnabas, conversation occurred between Paul and Mark, they visited together, and Paul humbled himself to welcome him back. Neither Paul nor Mark allowed the gospel to be arrested in their lives or the Church, but pursued the good of the Church by means of personal ministry as well as personal reconciliation.

John Wesley and Charles Simeon were two of the greatest preachers of the mid to late 1700s. Wesley and Whitefield had infamously divided because of their disagreement over Calvinism. To Whitefield, Wesley gave too much credit to man's will in salvation. To Wesley, Whitefield undercut evangelism with his Calvinism. Charles Simeon, the famous rector of Holy Trinity in Cambridge was a devout Calvinist as well as powerful evangelist. He once met Wesley and the following conversation ensued:

'Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions, not from impertinent curiosity, but for real instruction . . . Pray Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God if God had not first put it into your heart?'

'Yes, I do indeed.'

'And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?'

'Yes, solely through Christ.'

'But, Sir, supposing you were first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?'

'No; I must be saved by Christ from first to last.'

'Allowing then that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?'

'No.'

'What then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother's arms?'

'Yes, altogether.'

'And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto his heavenly kingdom?'

'Then, Sir, with your leave, I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is, in substance, all that I hold, and as I hold it: and therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree.'

May God give us grace to continue speaking, visiting, and accommodating one another so that we may be reconciled and continue to advance the church with the way we demonstrate and speak the gospel to others.