

Acts 15:36-16:5, No. 33
“There’s Always a Problem”
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Two Lord’s Days back we considered the heroic effort made by the early Christians to overcome all obstacles to their unity. Jews were welcoming Gentiles into the church and *vice versa*, no matter the deep cultural divide that had so long separated the two populations, no matter the ancient practices of the Jewish faith, so precious to every Jewish man or woman, practices that Gentile Christians did not observe. Don’t underestimate the divide that separated Jew from Gentile in that day. Many Jews grew up despising Gentiles as unclean, and the Greco-Roman world generally looked down on Jews as disloyal and unpatriotic, not so unlike the way Muslims are widely viewed in the western world today. It would have been no small thing for Jewish Christian parents to permit their daughter to marry even the most attractive and devout Gentile young man.

Text Comment

- v.36 Paul and Barnabas apparently remained in Antioch long enough to be sure that the controversy over Gentile freedom from Jewish religious obligations had been laid to rest and that Jews and Gentiles were happily cooperating in the life and work of the church.
- v.38 We were told in 13:13 that John Mark had left them mid-trip, but not told why. We are not told why here either, but Luke makes it clear enough that at least Paul thought that John Mark’s departure reflected poorly on the younger man. What his failure was we may not know – was it a lack of nerve, or an unwillingness to work hard, or to submit to the older men? – whatever it was, it was enough to cause Paul to doubt the wisdom of taking Mark along a second time. Remarkable really, this is one of the authors of the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark. Barnabas, his relative, wanted to give him a second chance; Paul did not.
- v.40 As we noted last time, Paul had taken the measure of Silas on the road from Jerusalem to Antioch and while conducting ministry with him in Antioch and obviously had liked what he saw.
- v.41 This time Paul did not travel by sea but by land. We know nothing about how the churches in Cilicia were founded, but we do know that Paul’s earliest evangelistic work was in this area. That was before he was summoned by Barnabas to work in Antioch and before he took his place as a main character in Luke’s narrative. As we will read in 16:4, part of his ministry involved telling the churches about what had happened in Jerusalem and Antioch and delivering the letter of the Jerusalem council with its conclusions and its advice.
- 16:1 Lystra and Derbe, the last towns that were visited on Paul’s first journey, are the first to be visited this time as Paul, having traversed the narrow pass in the Taurus Mountains

known as the Cilician Gates, approached from the east rather than from the west as before.

- v.3 This is our introduction to a man whose life and work would leave its mark at a number of places in the New Testament. He was for a long time a trusted and valued aide of the Apostle Paul, indeed, two of Paul's letters would be written to him (1 and 2 Timothy). He knew the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, who mentions him in his final chapter, and so on.

Timothy was half-Jewish by his mother Eunice, so circumcising him did not betray the principle enunciated by the Jerusalem assembly, viz. that Gentiles would not be required to be circumcised to be Christians. While not necessary to circumcise Timothy, it was possible to do so since his mother was a Jew and he was half Jew. Thus doing so served to lessen potential offense in the minds of Jewish believers. The statement "for they all knew that his father was a Greek," suggests that the Jews would have known that, though his mother was Jewish, Timothy himself had not been circumcised. As we learn in Galatians 2:3, Titus, on the other hand, another of Paul's aides, was a full Gentile. Paul would not consent to his circumcision, nor was it demanded by the Jewish church. But what is clear, a point that will become important later in Acts, is that Paul was certainly not asking Jews to stop being Jews once they became Christians. They were free to retain the observances of their ancient faith which the Gentile Christians were not being required to practice.

- v.5 This is the fourth of these summary statements that serve as chapter dividers in Luke. They are subscriptions; that is they come at the end of a chapter rather than at the beginning. So the next section, from 16:6 to 19:20 is chapter 5 of 6.

We have before us a remarkable piece of history, one of the most unexpected developments in all of Luke's narrative of early Christian history. Who would ever have imagined that Paul and Barnabas would find it impossible to work together? Still more, how could this have happened *so soon after that triumph of Christian unity* reported in chapter 15? The reader of the New Testament is, of course, well aware that disputes and contentions and disagreements among believers were a sad fact of life in early Christianity, as they have been ever since. Think of the divisions that almost tore the Corinthian church apart, or the smaller fracas between Euodia and Syntyche, two women in the church in Philippi (4:2).

But we are not talking about ordinary Christians who failed to live up to the demands of Christian unity. We are talking about Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement as he was called earlier in Acts, and the Apostle Paul. Surely *these two men* of all men could surmount their disagreement over Mark and work together for the progress of the Gospel. Whatever either man thought about the merits of the case, surely they should have realized that the one thing they could not allow was for the spread of the good news to suffer because of their failure to agree about Mark. Would we not have expected that not either one or the other *but both men* would have said, "Well, I'm not so sure of the wisdom of this but we'll do it your way." And surely both men could have said, "I promise I'll work hard to ensure that having Mark along proves to be an altogether good thing."

We can easily understand the disagreement itself and, for that matter, rather easily see both sides of the dispute. Paul, understandably, questioned the wisdom of taking a colleague on a long, arduous, and perhaps dangerous journey, to make him part of a small team that needed to regard each other with mutual trust and confidence, when that person himself had previously proved to be unreliable on just that kind of journey. [Peterson, 448] On the other hand, Barnabas would have said, we suppose, that forgiveness and second chances are the gospel way. How can we preach forgiveness and fail to practice it ourselves?

We can't help but wonder how the dispute unfolded. Was only one of them at fault, or both? The fact that Luke explains Paul's reasoning but not Barnabas' may suggest that he felt it necessary to justify Paul's harder line. [Peterson, 447] But another commentator astutely observes:

"It is a classic example of the perpetual problem of whether to place the interests of the individual or of the work as a whole first, and there is no rule of thumb for dealing with it. In this particular case a happy solution was reached in that Paul was able to choose his own companion for his part of the work, while Barnabas was able to take Mark under his wing and help him develop as a missionary." [Marshall, 258]

True enough, matters eventually turned out better than they might have, but the break-up of two men who had worked so well together must have stung, it had to have been embarrassing to the men themselves and uncomfortable for the Christians in Antioch, and certainly what Luke describes as a sharp disagreement didn't increase the reputation of Christians for their ability to surmount the typical human barriers to unity. What did Paul say to the Galatians when he showed up without Barnabas? That he and Barnabas had argued and gone their separate ways? What kind of example would that be for new Christians?

Fact is, Paul couldn't say that Mark was a heretic or that his life was a poor recommendation of the gospel and disqualified him as a preacher and teacher of the faith. Nothing like that is ever suggested and what we know of Mark's future life makes that idea frankly preposterous. This was an argument about the wisdom of taking a particular man along on a mission trip, with two good and wise men disagreeing about what to do and digging in their heels.

In fact, we can't help but wonder if the dispute, once it had become a matter of principle, as apparently it did, became angry, as disputes of this kind so frequently do. The word translated "sharp disagreement" in v. 39 might very well suggest "indignation" or "anger." The word in its various forms does in other places in the Bible, though not in every case. Frankly, knowing what we do know of Paul's somewhat fiery temperament, it would not surprise us to learn that some hard words were exchanged between the two men. If so, that only makes their failure to find a way forward the more discouraging.

And then what of the other leaders in the church in Antioch? We might well have expected them to lock Barnabas and Saul in a room and tell them, "Look guys – they called grown men "guys" in those days! – your work is too important to be interfered with because of this personal squabble. Begin with prayer, remind yourselves of how well you worked together in Galatia, and then talk out the problem. We don't care whether Mark accompanies you or not, but we care

deeply that you continue to work happily together. You can leave this room when you work out your problem, but you're not leaving until you do! We cannot have two of the principal leaders of the Christian movement bringing disrepute upon the gospel by an unwillingness to work together!" But apparently that was not done, or if it were in some fashion, it wasn't successful at healing the breach.

And what of Mark himself. Did he ever go to his relative and say, "Barnabas, I can't stand the thought that I might be the cause of a rift between you and Paul, two men whom I respect as no others and whom God has called to do such great things for the salvation of others. Leave me out of this. You and Paul go on without me." For all we know, he might have said something like that, but by that time Barnabas had also dug in his heels.

It is worth saying, I suppose, that history seems to have vindicated Barnabas. Mark proved himself an able and faithful worker and was eventually reunited with Paul in a very happy and fruitful way. No doubt Paul's unwillingness to take him along created something of a breach between the two men, but eventually that breach was healed. What did Paul think about his parting of the ways with Barnabas then? Could this be one of the things he regretted so much about his behavior when he wrote in Romans 7 about the many things he had done that he wish he had not done? It is hard for us to believe that Paul was at fault and, of course, Paul was Luke's hero, but it can't be said that Luke has come to Paul's defense exactly. Perhaps years later Paul himself told Luke not to defend his actions because he couldn't defend them himself.

In any case, it is no accident that what Calvin calls this "melancholy disagreement," is reported in Luke's narrative cheek to jowl with his account of the triumph of Christian unity in the previous paragraphs. The fact that it is followed immediately by the account of another such triumph of unity, of love, of thoughtfulness of others – Paul's circumcision of Timothy, something not absolutely necessary, but helpful to Christian unity – only further throws into relief this deplorable failure by two eminent Christian men to work together for the gospel's sake. We have an episode of disunity sandwiched between two episodes that highlight the overcoming of barriers separating believers far greater than whether or not to add a third man to a missionary team. We might well have imagined that such a thing would never have happened – not then; not between these two men – but it did. And in that we find the lesson.

The Christian church must live with moral failure. We Christians must never accept that failure as normal, never come to terms with it, never grow indifferent toward it, but it will accompany us all the way to the end. The fact is that this sharp disagreement was between one of the most celebrated of the apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ and a man who was as near to being an apostle as anyone could have been without being one. Indeed, though not one of the Twelve and not called to be an apostle as Paul was, Barnabas was considered an apostle in a broader sense, as Luke refers to him as an apostle in 14:4, 14. Surely we are to draw the obvious conclusion: if such men as these, with the spiritual advantages and authority given to them, with the history that they shared – remember, Paul's entire ministry, humanly speaking, he owed to Barnabas (it was Barnabas who had introduced him to the apostles in Jerusalem and vouched for his conversion and it was Barnabas who plucked him from obscurity and brought him into the center of the gospel's advance. *Have you thought about that? Humanly speaking, if it weren't for Barnabas, you and I might never have heard of the apostle Paul!* I say, if such men as these

should have a spat and separate from one another, surely we are being shown and taught that dispute, division, and separation were going to be millstone the church would have to wear about her neck.

This is often the implication of biblical examples of sin. If a man with the faith and devotion of David could commit adultery and murder, how much more vulnerable to sin and temptation must you and I be, ordinary people that we are. If a man like Peter who witnessed all of the Lord's miracles and observed his life for upwards of three years, could publicly betray him as he did, how much more vigilant must you and I be to practice our loyalty to Jesus. And so on.

Believe me, the more church history you read the less difficulty you will have believing that to be true. Some of the women in our church have recently read in a Sunday School class a life of Mary Slessor, the Scottish missionary to West Africa. She was an intrepid woman, a true hero of Christian missions. She lived and worked in a dangerous place – other missionaries were falling dead around her all the time from the West African fevers – faced down perils of all kinds, rescued children right and left, gave her life to the advance of the gospel among people who were in desperate need of it. She was like Paul in all those ways. But she was not easy to get along with; she could be a trying colleague – always sure her own way was the right way – and many of her fellow missionaries found her hard to love and even hard to *like*. [cf. D.P. Thompson, *Women of the Scottish Church*, 316]

There have been hosts of Mary Slessors in the history of Christian missions and, as a result, there have been hosts of sharp disagreements like the one that separated Barnabas and Paul. In fact, it is not too much to say that the history of modern Christian missions is in some significant part a gigantic effort to help missionaries get along with one another and to keep such sharp disagreements from derailing gospel work. We've had our share of sharp disagreements in our own Mission to the Word and in the process of selecting missionaries nowadays almost any mission board, ours among them, lays great stress on attempting to discover – no exact science this – how the candidate gets along with and works with others and how he or she handles disagreement.

The late Dr. Eleanor Soltau, sometimes hosted by my parents when I was a boy, something of a missionary hero in our circles, was such an intrepid person. She ran a tuberculosis hospital for Bedouins in what was to become Jordan at a time when public utilities were virtually non-existent and medical care was either non-existent or highly primitive, when TB was rampant in the Bedouin population, and when Jewish and Palestinian relations always simmered near the boiling point. She was a true pioneer: determined, fearless, unwilling to take "No" for an answer. She refused to be deterred from helping the sick and, as a result became something of a legend among the Bedouins and was eventually honored by the Jordanian royal family. When the RPCES, the denomination of which this church was part, joined the Presbyterian Church in America in 1982, Dr. Soltau became, with all other RPCES missionaries, a Mission to the World missionary. But she didn't like some of the things MTW asked her to do and so she dumped MTW and went with another mission agency more to her liking. There was, in other words, a sharp disagreement and a parting of ways. I have no idea what the rights and the wrongs of that situation were, I don't care to know; but I guarantee you that there were good arguments on both sides.

So, what are we to do with all of this, from Paul and Barnabas to Eleanor Soltau? If Luke is describing the life of the Christian church to us, warts and all, what is our duty? How are we *to obey* this text?

Well, perhaps it is too obvious to say, but then again, perhaps not. We ought not to have such sharp disagreements. I don't think anyone can say, even with the meager state of our information about this particular incident, I say I don't think anyone can defend both Paul and Barnabas here. One of them might have been more at fault than the other, but does anyone here believe that both of those men would have defended their actions, looking back on them from heaven? Shame on them! We don't usually find ourselves saying or thinking we would ever be in a position to say, "Shame on the Apostle Paul," but he himself reminds us in Romans 7 that there would have been plenty of opportunities for people to say just that, had they closely observed his life. Such is the hard, the dismal reality of sin in even the most devout and consecrated Christian life.

Remember, no gospel principal was at stake here; it was a difference of opinion pure and simple. Surely we ought to take our marching orders from this failure to find a way forward and renew our determination never to allow such sharp disagreements that divide us from Christian brothers and sisters, all the more never to be the *cause* of such a disagreement ourselves, especially if those disagreements interfere with a united testimony and united ministry to the world. There are many things infinitely more important than whether you get your way or I get mine. Paul in 15:1-35 and in 16:1-5 is our example, not Paul in 15:36-41.

But there is more direction here than simply that, important as that first lesson is and must be. Given the fact that in the two-thousand years of Christian history since it has never been possible to eliminate such sharp disagreements from the church's life, given the fact that even the best of Christian people and Christian leaders have been separated from one another by such differences of opinion, *it becomes an important part of Christian wisdom to accept that in certain cases one must simply move on.* There is nothing to be done. Whether one or the other of these men was at fault or both of them matters not in the final analysis. There was no agreement; they couldn't or wouldn't find one.

But they weren't going to hang around Antioch for the rest of their lives beating the issue to death like a dead horse. A solution proved impossible under the circumstances, or so it seemed, and so these two great men went their separate ways taking others with them. We've had such disputes here through the years and much as we may have tried to resolve them, much as we may have hoped they could be happily resolved, they were not resolved. And people went their separate ways. It was a failure, no doubt. Absolutely. But, pray tell, what else was to be done?

We wish it were not so, but it was so and our life and work still lay before us. We moved on. In such cases, of course, we wait upon the Lord and pray to him in hopes that in time the Lord will achieve a reconciliation and effect an agreement that we cannot. In this particular case such a reconciliation and such an agreement were achieved and very happily. Surely it is a beautiful thing, a most beautiful thing, that after what happened here, at the very end of his life and now a much older man, Paul in prison in Rome, awaiting his execution, wrote in his last letter to Timothy,

“Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.” [2 Tim. 4:11]

Among the few men Paul most wanted to have with him when he went to his death was Mark, this very Mark whom years before he had mistrusted so much that he separated from Barnabas – perhaps his closest friend in the world – just so that he wouldn’t have to take Mark with him on his next missionary journey. That he wanted Mark with him at the end is beautiful reconciliation indeed!

There is so much we wish were different than it is. There is so much we cannot change. The Christian life requires a wise recognition of that fact and faithful, cheerful, perseverance in the face of it. As Gregory the Great, the Gregory of Gregorian chant fame, wisely put it:

“The holy church corrects certain things with fervor, she tolerates others with meekness, she closes her eyes on still others and bears them with reflective attention.”

That is how we are to *obey* the text we have read this morning. To have as few disputes between us as possible and, when they cannot be avoided, to carry ourselves in them and toward others with whom we disagree so as to cause even our enemies to say: there is more love and peace and patience in a Christian dispute than there is in our agreement!