

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 5/1/94
Acts 15:36-41 "When Godly People Disagree"

Welcome: Did you encourage someone this week? (last week's challenge)

Communion:

Intro:

It's a fact. At times, even godly people disagree.

Sherry and I had our eyes opened to this shortly after we were married. We were married in July, and moved to Grand Rapids in August. I started seminary, and she found a job as a secretary to the faculty at a Christian college. That job was a real answer to prayer. Not only would it provide much needed income, the thought of working at a Christian institution sounded like music to our ears! After having a secretarial job in the dog eat dog, secular world for the previous four years, it was now her privilege to work every day for professors who love Christ. I was sure it would be the next best thing to having a job in heaven itself.

We both learned something quickly. There are problems everywhere, even at Christian institutions. Don't get me wrong. I believe in Christian institutions, and certainly in Christian education. And problems are not unique to just this particular school. But people are people. People have different personalities, and agendas, and priorities, and expectations, even Christian people. Whether the issue is whose syllabus gets typed first, or how you handle payment of overtime, one thing is true. Even godly people can disagree.

It's not necessarily bad to disagree. The issue is what do we do when we disagree. Disagreement can be a roadblock to biblical encouragement.

We have been considering what the Bible has to say about encouragement in a series entitled, "Fresh Air in the Church." Our approach has been to do a biographical study of one of the greatest encouragers that ever lived, a man that the apostles nicknamed, "Son of Encouragement." His name was Barnabas. What an encourager!

Last week, in Acts 9 & 11, Barnabas showed us that we must overcome 4 barriers if we are to be biblical encouragers: convenience, conformity, criticism, and competition. Barnabas overcame each of those barriers.

But this morning, as we wrap up our mini-series, we're going to see another barrier, one that in fact tripped up Barnabas--the barrier of disagreement.

I wish Acts 15:36-41 was not in the Bible. What I mean is that I wish the event described there had never happened. But it did. And God preserved its record in the Bible. He did so for our benefit. I

You see, Acts 15 is the record of what happened when two godly men disagreed. Two solid friends, who both loved Christ, hit a roadblock in Acts 15. Their relationship was never the same again. In Acts 15, Barnabas and Paul disagreed.

What should happen when we disagree as Christians? Our text this morning will help us answer that.

Proposition: Acts 15:36-41 records three painful steps that took place in the disagreement between Barnabas and his friend Paul. As we examine them, four principles emerge which can help us when we face disagreement.

I. Step #1: The disagreement involved a Decision (36-38).

A. What was the background of the decision?

B. What was the basis of the decision?

1. Barnabas felt.

2. Paul thought.

II. Step #2: The disagreement involved a Dispute (39a).

III. Step #3: The disagreement involved a Departure (39b-41).

Principles which can help us...

1. Disagreements are inevitable.

2. We need to learn to think of Christ when we disagree.

3. God can use our disagreements for His glory.

4. Even when disagreements happen, the work of the church must go on.

I. Step #1: The disagreement involved a Decision (36-38).

I must remind you that the book of Acts is narrative literature. The writer, Luke, is giving us a theological history of the early church. He takes 28 chapters to tell us how the church started, and within one generation took the message of Christ to Rome, and throughout the Roman Empire. Luke is telling us what happened.

He doesn't tell us what SHOULD have happened. Don't miss this. When Luke describes the disagreement between Barnabas and Paul, he is not endorsing their behavior. Nor does he cover it up. He tells it like it is.

Their disagreement involved a decision. Before we can probe that decision, we need to ponder a couple of questions.

A. What was the background of the decision?

V 36 "And some days after"

After what? Allow me to sketch the background of what led up to Acts 15.

We'll never fully appreciate the disagreement until we put it in its context.

Prior to Acts 15, Barnabas and Paul had had an amazing relationship. They were the best of friends. After Paul became a Christian, Barnabas endorsed him when nobody else would (9:27). Barnabas took Paul under his wings. Barnabas recruited Paul for missionary work in Antioch (11:25).

Barnabas and Paul ministered together for a year in Antioch (11:26). And then together, Barnabas and Paul took a gift from the Christians in Antioch and took it to the famine torn believers in Jerusalem (11:30). They returned together to Antioch, bringing with them Barnabas' nephew John Mark (12:25).

In Acts 13, they were commissioned by the Holy Spirit and the church in Antioch, and sent out on the first official missionary trip. They traveled together to 8+ cities in Asia Minor. They stuck by one another when they were run out of Pisidian Antioch (13:50).

In Acts 14, they were run out of Iconium together. When the people of Lystra saw the miracle Paul did, they thought Paul and Barnabas were gods, and tried to

worship them. Together, they refused that worship, and when Paul was stoned, Barnabas stood by him. They didn't give up, but encouraged each other and kept going. They planted churches together (14:21-22). They returned to Antioch and had a missionary conference together (14:27). They stayed a long time in Antioch together (14:28).

When the Jewish traditionalists in Judea criticized what was happening up north in Antioch, Barnabas and Paul traveled together to Jerusalem to defend what God was doing (15:2-3). They attended the tense Jerusalem council together. The church leaders appointed the two of them to take a letter of commendation back to Antioch, together. Then, they stayed along time in Antioch, teaching the Word of God together (15:35).

What's the point? This--Barnabas and Paul had been through a lot together! They had served side by side for years. They had walked hundreds of miles together. They had spent literally hundreds of hours preaching together, praying together, planning together, dreaming together about the great work God would do through them.

But even the best of relationships are fragile. Often, it's not the big things that disrupt a relationship. It's the little things.

"Some days after." Barnabas and Paul had just conquered the big contention, the big controversy with the Judaizers in Jerusalem. Then they were tripped up by a "little" decision.

What was the basis of that decision? Let's look...

B. What was the basis of the decision?

Paul came up with an idea. V 36 "And some days after, Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go..." Great idea! The discipler is responsible for the disciple. On their first missionary trip, God used them to introduce many people to Christ. "Let's go see how they do." Fine so far. Then Barnabas made a suggestion.

V 37 "And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark." Why did he want to do that? John Mark was Barnabas's cousin (or nephew). He loved Christ. Good idea, right?

I can just see Paul's jaw stiffen as he peered into the eyes of Barnabas in v 38, "But Paul thought it not good to take him with them."

Why not? V 38 "who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work." What's Paul thinking about? An incident that happened months (years?) before on their first missionary trip, an incident Luke devotes only a passing remark to. Acts 13:13 "Now when Paul and his company loosed from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem."

What happened? John Mark went AWOL. Was he homesick? Was he too immature for the hardships of missionary life? We don't know.

What we do know is this. Barnabas and Paul had a disagreement on their hands! Barnabas wanted to take John Mark. But Paul disagreed with his suggestion.

Observation: I find something notable by its absence. There is no mention that Paul and Barnabas PRAYED about this decision. There is no mention that they asked the church to get involved in praying.

The text indicates something else that contributed to the disagreement. Barnabas felt (37). Paul thought (38).

1. Barnabas felt.

Barnabas was a "feeler." That's what made him such a good encourager. He felt for the needy Christians in Acts 4, and sold his land. He felt for Saul in Acts 9, and took a risk in his behalf. He felt for the alien Christians in Antioch, and went to bat for them. He was a feeler.

In March while attending a class in Chicago, I heard Stuart Briscoe make an observation that struck me as being profound and true. Briscoe, a well known author and pastor in Milwaukee, said, "Our pews are full of people who think they cannot do what they have never attempted." He's right.

John Mark was a man with potential. Barnabas saw it. And Barnabas was determined to develop it (Weist, v 37, "kept on insisting"). Barnabas felt for John Mark. What about Paul?

2. Paul thought.

V 38 "But Paul thought it not good." (NIV "But Paul did not think it wise.") Paul was a thinker. He looked at the facts, and made a decision. He had good reasons. One, look at Mark's track record. Two, Mark let the work down the first time.

I don't believe Paul's motive personal. He had nothing against Mark as a person. It was the "work" he was thinking of. "Barnabas, the Lord has given us a job to do! Our "work" is to proclaim Christ to the world. This "work" is so important that there's no room for half-hearted workers!"

Paul was a thinker who had feelings. Barnabas was a feeler who had thoughts.

Which is best? The church needs both. But both have their pitfalls. Wiersbe wrote this, "Paul looked at people and asked, 'What can they do for God's work?' while Barnabas looked at people and asked, 'What can God's work do for them?' Both questions are important to the Lord's work, and sometimes it is difficult to keep things balanced (466)."

Tran: There's step one in the disagreement process. A decision.

II. Step #2: The disagreement involved a Dispute (39a).

Next to Luther and Calvin, one of the most important leaders in the Protestant Reformation was a man named Ulrich Zwingli. Zwingli was ordained a Catholic priest, but like Luther, experienced a transformation by the power of the Scriptures, around the year 1516. He became a pastor in Zurich, Switzerland. He was committed to the authority of Scripture, and to evangelical reform in the church. He was a great man of God.

Yet history records he had his share of disagreements with other godly men. One was a momentous dispute with Luther over the issue of the Lord's Supper (Evang. Dict., Elwell, 1204). And an even greater dispute broke out with a man named Felix Manz. Felix Manz, who lived in Zurich, was a leader of a group known as the Anabaptists (modern day Mennonites come from). Manz and the Anabaptists believed

in baptism by immersion for those who were converted. Zwingli believed and practiced infant baptism. What's more, Zwingli had political power, and declared it illegal to "re-baptize" anyone who was already baptized as an infant. Manz was convinced Scripture taught otherwise, and defied Zwingli's order. Do you know what happened?

Zwingli said (my words), "Ok, you think baptism is so important. I'll baptize you for good." And Zwingli ordered Manz to be tied up, taken to a body of water, pushed in, and drowned. When he was being led out to his execution, his mother and brother met him, and admonished him to be steadfast to the end. His final words were heard, "Lord, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." (The Reformation, Hillerbrand, 234)

Talk about a difference of opinion! Throughout history, even godly men have disagreed. And godly people disagree today. The problem is not disagreeing. It's when the disagreement turns into a dispute. That's what happened with Barnabas and Paul.

V 39 "And the contention was so sharp between them."

The word "contention" is a graphic word ("paroxusmos"). We get the word "paroxysm" from it. I think of what happens when you pour peroxide on a wound. It boils and bubbles and burns. Why? Because it attacks the germs.

Do you think Paul and Barnabas raised their voices with each other? Remember, Luke is telling us what happened, not what should have happened.

Sometimes we get the idea that there were no "church fights" in the 1st century church. William LaSor reminds us (239), "The men and women of the Early Church were the same kind of human beings that you and I are. If God hadn't been watching over His Church, it would have disappeared quickly!"

Tran: We've seen two steps so far--a Decision, and a Dispute. The dispute was so severe that it resulted in a third step.

III. Step #3: The disagreement involved a Departure (39b-41).

The dispute led to broken fellowship. It seemed like the only solution for these two servants of Christ was to divide the territory, and separate. And that's what they did.

V 39 "Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus." That was his home country.

Vv 40-41 "And Paul chose Silas...went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches."

Is it possible to be an encourager, to a FAULT? Can encouragers go overboard? Was Barnabas thinking so much with his heart that he lost his head? Was Barnabas wrong for wanting to take Mark along?

The text doesn't say. Nor will I. Personally, I think both men were right, and both men were wrong. My opinion...

Both were wrong. Barnabas was wrong for running from an unresolved problem. V 39 says he took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. I don't doubt his motive. He removed himself from the church in Antioch because he didn't want to be divisive. But

nonetheless, he left an unresolved problem behind him. Paul was wrong for not listening to Barnabas, for not giving ear to his insight.

Both were right. V 40 says that the church "commended" Paul as he left. But history bears record that Barnabas did restore John Mark. Mark wrote the second gospel. And eventually, even Paul recognized his usefulness in ministry (read II Tim 4:11).

A tragic story, but so what? I would suggest from this story there are...

Four Principles which can help us when we disagree...

What do we learn about how to handle disagreements from the incident with Barnabas and Paul? Four principles emerge. By the way, these principles apply to all types of relationships. They can help us in our marriage relationships, in our relationships with our children or parents or siblings, as well as in our relationships in the church. Here they are.

1. Disagreements are inevitable.

Relationships are fragile, even the best of them. Even godly husbands and wives disagree with each other from time to time. We are different. We see things from different perspectives and backgrounds. That's true in marriage, in business, in the church.

2. We need to learn to think of Christ when we disagree.

Jesus Christ is our Savior. If you are a Christian this morning, Christ has reconciled you to God. He also wants to reconcile us to each other. When we disagree, He wants us to think of Him. He wants us to disagree in love.

The world doesn't know how to do this. They can't do this. They get even. They keep score of wrongs. But we must not.

What do you do when someone disagrees with you? Do you blast them? It bothers me not just a little when I hear the way some Christians talk about others who hold different theological positions. Do you believe in the pre-trib rapture? So do I. But how do we talk about those who don't? "Those blind idiots!" May I remind you that those "blind idiots" are our brothers?

We need to learn to think of Christ when we disagree. Though Paul and Barnabas parted, you find not one caustic word about the other. Just the opposite. In I Cor 9:6, Paul spoke favorably of Barnabas.

3. God can use our disagreements for His glory.

Barnabas and Paul separated. A waste? No, for in the providence of God, now there were two missionary teams instead of one! Wiersbe is right, "God changes His workmen, but His work goes right on...If God had to depend on perfect people to accomplish His work, He would never get anything done (466)."

God can use our flaws for His glory. Aren't you glad?

Some of us this morning have the baggage of a wrecked relationship in our past. We think God can't use us anymore. Beloved, trust in God's grace this morning.

4. Even when disagreements happen, the work of the church must go on.

How do you think their departure affected the believers, the Christians in Antioch? Remember, Paul and Barnabas were two of their spiritual leaders, their mentors? Were they hurt? No doubt.

But listen. The work of the church went on. The dispute between Paul and Barnabas didn't paralyze the church from its mission.

V 40 says the new missionary journey was "commended by the brethren." And three chapters later, in 18:22, we find the church at Antioch was still going strong for Christ. Why?

They knew that the success of a church must not rise and fall on the shoulders of one person. It didn't in Antioch. Acts 15:35 indicates that Paul and Barnabas taught the Word in the church at Antioch. But "many others" did to. And though two leaders disagreed, the work went on. The Word prevailed.

Are you in disagreement with someone this morning? If so, fix your eyes on Christ. Don't delay. Allow Him to lead. Do what's right.