



THE STORY CONTINUES

WHEN WE DISAGREE | ACTS 15:35-16:5

When is the last time you were involved in a really good fight? For some the memory may be as fresh as this morning, for others it may have been a while. But we've all been there. We all disagree. There are times we disagree strongly. There are times we disagree so strongly we part company.

Sadly enough, strong disagreements often take place in contexts where we least expect them. In healthy marriages, deep friendships, between business partners and in the church.

Disagreement in the church is especially sad. Somehow we feel like the gospel should lift us above petty differences. But no difference seems petty at the time, and we all tend to dig in and make our differences far bigger than they need to be.

In a perfect world, no one would disagree, but we do not live in a perfect world. In a perfect church, we would rise above petty differences and rally around the gospel, but there are no perfect churches.

In Acts 16, we witness one of the most disappointing scenes in Scripture, maybe even church history. We can't help but feel the sting nearly two millennia later. Paul and Barnabas disagree so strongly that they part company.

Luke includes the story because it plays an important role in the larger story. He also includes the story to be brutally honest about the heroes of Scripture. The truth is our heroes, even Paul and Barnabas, are not the true heroes of Scripture. They are men and women, just like you and me. They are subject to human frailty, and they, like us, often struggle to apply the gospel, they so deeply believe.

Most of all, Luke wants us to know that the gospel is not threatened by human frailty. So far the gospel has survived bitter opposition from without, the hypocrisy from within, and it will rise above a bitter disagreement between Paul and Barnabas.

PAUL AND BARNABAS PART COMPANY (15:35-39)

³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. ³⁶ Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.

1. How would you describe the relationship between Paul and Barnabas up to this point?
2. What brings the two into "sharp disagreement?"
3. What comes to mind when you hear the words, "sharp disagreement?"
4. How would you characterize Paul's argument (in the best light possible)?
5. How would you characterize Barnabas's argument?
6. Which argument seems most compelling to you? Why?

THE GOSPEL THRIVES IN SPITE OF DISAGREEMENT (vv. 15:39-16:5)

Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

^{16:1} Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. ² The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. ³ Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

1. Is there anything in the text that seems to indicate that Luke, the church in Antioch, or God (for that matter) tended to take one side over the other?
2. What does that teach us about how we should position ourselves when our friends disagree?

3. In an interesting side note, with an added twist of irony, Paul insists that Timothy be circumcised in order to join he and Silas in delivering the message "you don't have to be circumcised or embrace the Law of Moses in order to be a part of God's family."
 - a. Why do you think Paul insists that Timothy be circumcised?
 - b. What does this move tell you about Paul and his strategy to be a faithful witness for the gospel?
4. While there is nothing good about Paul and Barnabas's disagreement and parting of the ways, God brings a lot of good out of an otherwise tragic situation. Take some time to list some of the ways that God brings good out of the situation?
5. In 2 Corinthians, Paul once again lists Barnabas as one of his traveling companions (2 Corinthians 9:6), he sends greetings from John Mark in his letter to the Colossians (Colossians 4:10). In Paul's very last letter, he requests Mark's companionship as he awaits trial in Rome (2 Timothy 4:11). How do these passages bring the story to a fitting conclusion?
6. What does the entire incident tell us about the character of God and the gospel?
7. Does it in any way excuse disagreement in the church?
8. What are some steps we can all take to be a more agreeable people?
9. When there are disagreements how should we treat the parties involved?
10. What does this particular disagreement teach us about putting people on a pedestal rather than keeping our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus?