May 14, 2017
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Acts: When Christians Disagree
Acts 15: 30-41

I want to greet and honor all the moms out there today, and should my mom be watching this message later, I just want to say, “I love you mom. Sorry about the April Fool’s joke when I limped up the driveway at the age of 17 and told you that I had totaled my car. You really showed your love for me when you said, “We’re not going to tell your dad!” I’ll always love you for that Mom, even though you took a swing at me when I said “April fools.” So…you know…Happy Mother’s Day!”

OK, best to move on.

This morning we will return to our journey through Acts. There are 28 chapters in Acts, and we will wrap up chapter 15 this morning, so we’re over half way through! For those who have recently joined us on this journey, please remember that all of the sermons in this series on Acts are available free of charge on our website via audio, video, and manuscript.

Now, let me remind you where we are. If you recall, at the beginning of chapter 15, a council was formed in Jerusalem to discuss whether non-Jewish believers must first submit to circumcision and come under the Jewish law in order to be saved. As we saw a few weeks ago, the conclusion of that council established the bedrock of our Christian doctrine: we are saved by grace alone...there are no other requirements that determine our salvation.

Since the debate about this issue began in the Antioch church where Paul and Barnabas had served as pastors, the council has now sent Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch with a letter stating their conclusions, and along with the letter the council has sent two men of high standing, Silas and Judas.

Let’s pick up the story now by reading Acts 15:30-41.

The title of my message this morning is “When Christians Disagree.” Truthfully, that could be the title for all of Acts 15 because the entire chapter highlights two “disagreement stories”. The first story is a theological disagreement that breaks out in the Antioch church, and the second story is a personal disagreement that breaks out between Paul and Barnabas.

Here at the end of the first disagreement story, we read in vss. 30-35 that the early Christians achieve a peaceful and positive resolution to a very divisive and difficult debate. After wrestling over a point of theology that could have forever corrupted the gospel, the Jerusalem council
sends a letter to the church in Antioch assuring both Jewish and Gentile believers that salvation is by grace alone. To authenticate the message, they send two leaders of the Jerusalem church, Silas and Judas, who are warmly received. We learn that the letter and the messengers from Jerusalem bring about encouragement and strengthening to the church in Antioch.

What we have here at the end of the first disagreement story is a good old “happy ending” scenario, right? A disagreement led to conflict which led to prayerful deliberation which led to discernment by elders which led to a clarification of the gospel which led to a peaceful resolution and a happy ending.

Sometimes that happens. I wish I could say that always happens when Christians disagree; but as we all know, there are occasions when Christians disagree and there is not a happy ending per se. The second “disagreement story” is a prime example.

In vs. 36 we read, “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.’”

Paul is eager to check in on the new churches that were planted on their epic journey in Asia Minor (see Acts 13 and 14). Paul knows that the new Christians will need teaching, coaching, and encouragement. So he hits up his travelling buddy, his brother from another mother…Barnie…and suggests they make a return trip to see how everybody is doing.

Now, in case you haven’t been tracking through the book of Acts with us very long, it’s possible that you are not quite grasping the relationship that has formed between these two men. Paul and Barnabas are like Cheech and Chong, Starsky and Hutch, Simon and Garfunkle, Tango and Cash, Tin Cup and Romeo, Fred and Barnie, Kirk and Spock, Lenny and Squiggy, Batman and Robin, Ben and Jerry, fishing and hunting. salt and pepper, chips and salsa, peanut butter and jelly…dare I say, eggs and BACON!!! They simply go together! They are inseparable, they are best friends, they are brothers, they have travelled together, served together, suffered together, and seen God accomplish miracles together. Barnabas was likely the first true Christian friend that Paul had following his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. Barnabas was responsible for getting Paul plugged in with the church in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch. Ever since they first met, Paul and Barnabas have functioned like a well-oiled machine.

So what follows next in vss. 37-39 is more painful than we can imagine from simply reading these two verses. Here’s what Luke writes: “Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought it best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other.”
Let me unpack the history here so you can better understand what just happened.

First of all, we must remember that John Mark initially set out with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey in Acts 13. However, after sticking with them on the first leg of the trip in Cyprus, John Mark left Paul and Barnabas shortly after arriving in the Port of Perga and returned to his home in Jerusalem (13:13). Now…we never learn why John Mark left the team. I’m sure Luke knows, but he never shares that information in the book of Acts. Scholars have suggested all kinds of potential reasons ranging from sickness to the possibility that Mark couldn’t stand the intensity of a missionary lifestyle. We really don’t know. What we do know is that John Mark is a young man…maybe a teenager. I have a 17 year old son, so I’m betting John Mark bailed on the team because he had a girlfriend back home…I’m just saying.

Here’s another tidbit of information we learn from Colossians 4:10—John Mark is the cousin of Barnabas. That certainly thickens the plot a bit.

So here’s the scenario: Paul is a hard-charging, Alpha leader who wants to evangelize the whole world. He’s super intelligent, argumentative, and mission oriented. From his perspective, John Mark is a liability to the mission. He’s not cut out for the rigors of their journey; he can’t be trusted to hang in there when the going gets tough; and he should be left behind. Barnabas, on the other hand, is a man of encouragement, relationships, and nurturing. He is also the boy’s uncle. So from Barnie’s perspective, young John Mark needs a second chance to demonstrate his growth and his commitment to be on the mission field.

Now, who is right? How many of you think that Paul is right? How many of you think that Barnabas is right? And now you see why there is such a sharp disagreement. Truthfully, they’re both right. But because of their different personalities and perspectives, they come to an impasse. The Greek word here that describes their disagreement is paraxusmos, which is where we get the English word paroxysm (it’s OK, I had to look it up as well). Paroxysm means a sudden, violent outburst…it’s a word loaded with intensity. Clearly this was not a small difference of opinion…this disagreement was a deal-breaker, so much so that Luke writes, “…so that they separated from each other.”

Talk about disillusioning…this is that. If you were a member of the Antioch Church in those days, this is the last possible outcome you could have ever imagined. If someone had said that the day would come when Paul and Barnabas would separate and lead different ministries, the church members would have laughed and said, “NEVER! That will NEVER happen!” But here we have it in black in white…it happened. Again…if you are writing a myth or legend, you simply don’t include stories like this one. This story is in the book of Acts because, unfortunately, it happened.
I, for one, am grateful this story was included in the book of Acts. After 29 years of serving Christ in His church, I can testify too many painful stories that look a lot like this one. Christians disagree, and sometimes those disagreements lead to unhappy endings…at least in the short term.

My father-in-law served the same church in Virginia as the Senior Pastor for 28 years. It is the church my wife grew up in; it is the church where she accepted Christ and was baptized; it is the church where we were married; it is the church where I preached my first revival series; it is the church where we mourned the loss of Christy’s brother Kyle when he died. It’s also the church where two associate pastors turned against my father-in-law and led a group of people in a business meeting to fire him. Twenty-eight years of ministry, and that’s how it ended. Very painful.

In my former church on Hilton Head there was another Associate Pastor who became outraged that I left work early one day to play golf with some church members. The squabble that ensued became a raging fire that lasted for over a year and brought about a great deal of pain and disillusionment for me and many others at the church.

I am no stranger to church conflicts. As the Lead Pastor here at Colonial, I have seen my share of those who have left Colonial in the past nine years for any number of reasons. I have sat and listened to why people “can no longer call me their pastor;” why they cannot in good conscience continue on at Colonial; and all the reasons I’m probably not fit to be a pastor. You have to have some pretty thick skin to sit in my chair…but it still hurts.

Disagreements and conflict among Christians is always painful and disillusioning. It’s also inevitable. Even the most noble and virtuous Christian remains a person with a sin problem; and sometimes we simply cannot agree due to our personalities and perspectives. Sometimes there really isn’t a right or a wrong position; it’s just that we can’t seem to agree on the same position. I think that was the case here with Paul and Barnabas.

One could easily argue that Paul was right in excluding John Mark from the trip. Mark getting benched was the natural and necessary consequence for abandoning the team in Perga. Paul’s concern about John Mark compromising the mission, or even getting hurt on their next trip, was a valid concern.

However, one could also argue that Barnabas was right. John Mark clearly was repentant and eager for a second chance. Paul’s decision to leave him home was potentially crushing for this young man who clearly needed some encouragement, some mentoring, and another opportunity to prove himself on the mission field. Paul’s position lacked grace.
Unfortunately, because they were both “right,” they could not reach an agreement. The argument was heated to be sure, but in the end, a decision was made. Look at vs. 39-41, “And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

What we see happen here is not uncommon. The separation that comes from a heated disagreement ends up multiplying the ministry! Can you imagine how many churches have been planted as a result of a “Paul and Barnabas” disagreement throughout the past 1700 years? I suspect the number is in the hundreds of thousands! I can think of several noble, God-honoring ministries here in Kansas City that were birthed out of conflict. Had the conflict not happened, those ministries would not exist today.

God can and will redeem our squabbles and disagreements. God knows we are going to have our battles, and I don’t think these kinds of “separations” catch God by surprise at all. We’ll see later in chapter 16 that because Paul doesn’t go with Barnabas to Cyprus, his path will lead him to reach all kinds of new people groups. We’ll also see that Silas is the perfect teammate for Paul’s second missionary journey for any number of reasons. In other words, it will end up looking like God orchestrated the whole thing…the paroxysm and all! By the way, we learn later in Colossians that Mark eventually becomes a close friend and a comfort to Paul when he is imprisoned in Rome. The story ends well eventually…but here in Acts 15, it’s just plain difficult.

I don’t have time to unpack all the ways to “fight well” as believers, but let me list just a few:

1) We can disagree and still like each other. We can disagree and still be on the same team. We can disagree and speak well of each other in the public arena. We can disagree and still be very close friends. When Christians disagree, we may have to go our separate ways for a while like Paul and Barnabas, but that doesn’t mean we hold a grudge or make it personal. Whenever possible, we need to confine our disagreement to the subject at hand and not assault the other person’s character, defame their reputation, or sever the relationship.

2) Resist pulling out the “God” card on each other. Notice that Paul and Barnabas don’t resort to “God told me” phrases. They are both believers; they are both men of God; and they disagree. They are wise enough NOT to assume that because they are convinced they are right, God is somehow on their side and against the other guy. If scripture speaks to the controversy, great…yield to God’s Word. If the scripture does not speak to the controversy, it is not helpful to play the “God Card” as though somehow you have a more direct line to God than your Christian brother or sister.
3) Don’t let your disagreement derail the ministry of the Gospel. Paul and Barnabas come to an impasse regarding taking John Mark, but they agree on a plan that will ensure the ministry goes on, even though the notion of doing ministry apart from one another was certainly a crushing reality for both of them. The show must go on...we cannot allow our disagreements to impede the work of the Kingdom.

4) Take a deep breath and pray. We don’t see that happening here in our story, and that may have helped the situation. I find that it’s best to sleep on a situation and return to it in the morning rather than making crucial decisions in the heat of an argument that extends into the late evening. Things always look differently after a good night’s sleep and some focused time in prayer.

5) Trust God in the midst of a disagreement. Pray for one another and trust God that He can and will redeem your disagreement if you will remain humble, forgiving, and obedient to His will.

Looking back over my 47 years, I can tell you one thing: I would not be standing before you today had it not been for any number of nasty conflicts that happened in my life. Those painful disagreements kept some doors closed so that I was available to walk through other doors that eventually led me to this role in this church. Those painful events in my life toughened me up enough to take on this job and to stay when others would have left. I can honestly say that seeing God redeem past conflicts has increased my faith over the years. So I’ve learned to trust God in the midst of the conflict. I’ve learned to trust God with those who walk away from Colonial, or those who break fellowship with me for any number of reasons. I’ve learned to anticipate conflict so as not to be disillusioned when it comes, because this, too, is one of those things Paul was referring to when he wrote, “And we know that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28).

My challenge to us all is to fight well! Treat others as you would want to be treated in the heat of a disagreement. Forgive and ask for forgiveness. And should you have to part ways, do so with grace, preserving the relationship and giving glory to God for what He will do to redeem the conflict. Amen?

Before we close, I want to quickly share with you my excitement about our Summer Series and our Summer Groups. Beginning in just a few weeks, we will launch a series called “B.L.E.S.S.” that will run concurrently with our Summer Grow Groups. BLESS will be a series that equips believers to live out the rhythms of grace in the place God has planted you, beginning in the neighborhood where you live. The BLESS groups are designed to get you connected with other believers who live in or close to your neighborhood. Over the course of the series, we will learn how to bless our neighbors through prayer, intentional listening, table fellowship, service, and sharing our testimonies. The BLESS movement is part of the “What if the Church?” movement
that we have been a part of for many years, so dozens of other congregations will be living in the same rhythms and learning the same lessons as we are this summer.

Next Sunday our good friend Pastor Rob Wegner will be here from Westside Family Church to share more about what the BLESS movement is and how it has already impacted Westside and the surrounding neighborhoods in Lenexa.

I will close by simply saying this: in all the years I have served in the ministry, I have never been more excited and more hopeful for a practical, doable, empowering model of ministry than I am right now when I think of the BLESS movement. This is something we can all do…it’s organic, it’s patient, it’s relational, and I believe the Holy Spirit may bring about a great revival in our city if we are willing to take these lessons to heart. I hope you will jump into a BLESS group this summer and join us for the six week series that begins on June 4th.

Let’s pray.