

Followers of the Way

Learning from mistakes and doing better 2nd time around Paul, Barnabas and John Mark

Steve Campbell 23-07-23

Acts 15:22-41

Becoming a Christian is the best thing we can do in this life. However, it does not guarantee us immunity from life's common problems such as conflict and divisiveness. That's why God gave us Proverbs 15:1 –

A gentle answer turns away wrath,

but a harsh word stirs up anger.

We know how the Church was birthed by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and we are given a word picture of that earliest Church in Acts 2:42ff where the believers were devoted to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer, and had everything in common.

This ecclesiastical idyll did not last long, however, as in Ch.6 we read of a conflict. This was no doctrinal dispute, but a practical matter of distributing food. The Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in favour of the Hebraic widows and, unchecked, may have caused a major division in the Church along ethnic lines.

But the apostles didn't allow it to fester and faced the problem head on. They called the Church together, and instead of imposing a solution, asked the membership to choose seven men from among themselves to take on the task of distributing the daily food.

This meant that the seven deacons were appointed to take on this practical ministry whilst the apostles were freed up to concentrate on their calling to prayer and preaching the word.

Something good came out of this conflict and the Church continued to grow.

In our passage this morning from Acts 15 we read of another conflict, this time between two giants of the early Church, Paul and Barnabas. Before we look at the conflict that arose between these two great Church leaders we need to know a bit about their background.

This is how we refer to them but these were not their original names: Paul began life as Saul of Tarsus, and Barnabas was actually Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus.

We first encounter the latter in Acts 4:36 where he encourages others with his generosity and is nicknamed by the apostles as 'Son of Encouragement' or Barnabas.

He encouraged the apostles in Jerusalem to receive the former murderous Pharisee, but recently converted, Saul of Tarsus, as a genuine disciple.

And when he was sent to encourage the believers at Antioch, the first mixed Jewish and Gentile Church, he sought out Saul to help him in this task. He certainly lived up to his nickname!

Saul of Tarsus we are much more familiar with – born in a city in the province of Cilicia, of Benjamite Hebrew parents but also a Roman citizen, he was educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel and became a Pharisee zealous for the law, so much so he was willing to kill anyone who did not conform to his understanding of it.

All that changed when an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus turned his world upside down and he went from Saul the Pharisee to Paul the apostle to the Gentiles.

Both these men were excellent leaders with strong personalities who had worked well together, both in teaching the Church at Antioch, and on their first missionary journey through Cyprus and Galatia. This was the beginning of the mission to the Gentiles, for which both Paul and Barnabas gave evidence to the Jerusalem Council. It was this council that produced the letter announcing that Gentiles did not have to become Jewish proselytes to be accepted into the Church but only advised to ‘abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.’ (Acts 15:29)

Paul and Barnabas returned with the letter, accompanied by Judas and Silas from Jerusalem, to present the findings to the Church at Antioch. The Jewish and Gentile believers were encouraged by what they heard and were strengthened in their faith.

However, the letter was also addressed to the believers in Syria and Cilicia, and perhaps that’s why Paul makes his suggestion to Barnabas in v.36 - ‘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.’

This is when the conflict started – Barnabas, ever the encourager, wanted to take John Mark along with them, whereas Paul thought it unwise as he had deserted them on their first missionary journey. We are not told the reason *why* John Mark left them at Pamphylia and returned to Jerusalem. Some have conjectured that he took ill, others that he was not up to the task, especially in light of the spiritual battle with Elymas the sorcerer on Cyprus. Still others claim the young man became disillusioned when Paul took over the leadership of the team – in Cyprus Paul became the pre-eminent one and Barnabas second in command.

We don’t know the reason, we only know he left Paul and Barnabas to continue the work alone and Paul had never forgot it. Barnabas was willing to forgive and offer him a second chance, but Paul was having none of it. Both men were entrenched in their views and neither was willing to give way. They viewed ministry from different angles – Wiersbe, ‘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?”’¹

In modern parlance, Paul would be ‘task orientated’ while Barnabas would be more ‘relational.’

So sharp was their disagreement, and the Greek word indicates this, that they parted company. Barnabas, as promised, took John Mark with him giving him a second chance, and sailed to homeland of Cyprus encouraging the Churches there. Paul, on the other hand, chose Silas, one of the men who accompanied them from Jerusalem, and took the interior road to revisit the Churches in Syria and Cilicia.

This was a clash of personalities, a divergence so great that they left one another, even after all they had been through. It was an error of human judgement with faults on both sides: one holding too strongly to their principles; the other too lenient towards the wrongdoer.

¹ Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary, Vol.1, p.466

These are the human causes for the conflict. But could there be another factor which contributed to its cause? Let's go back to the beginning of what is called 'Paul's First Missionary Journey' Acts 13:1-3:

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'

So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

It was in the context of worship, prayer and fasting that the call to mission was heard. There is no mention of this at the beginning of the Second Missionary Journey, only that Paul made a suggestion to revisit the Churches that they planted and Barnabas agreed.

Could it be the absence of divine guidance, of waiting on the Lord, of seeking the Holy Spirit's counsel contributed to the conflict?

Whether or not it was, these two spiritual giants had such a sharp disagreement they parted company, yet even then God was able to bring good out of a bad situation. Instead of having one mission team, they now had two.

It's interesting to note how Luke describes both of the missions in vv.39-40, 'Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.'

Barnabas' departure is described as very matter of fact, whereas Paul has a commendation from the Church. I don't know if there is any significance in that and I haven't been able to find a commentary that mentions it.

We don't hear of Barnabas or John Mark again in Acts, it's not because Luke thought them unimportant but simply that Paul's ministry was his focus.

He concentrates on this in the rest of the book up until the apostle's Roman imprisonment. He doesn't mention any resolution to the conflict, but we know from Paul's epistles that he was eventually reconciled with both Barnabas and John Mark. He and Barnabas laboured together in Corinth (1 Cor 9:6) and in writing to Timothy he asks him to bring John Mark as he was helpful in his ministry (2 Tim 4:11)

So he lived up to the instructions he gave in Rom 12:18: 'If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.'

So what happened to Barnabas and John Mark? Apart from the few references in Paul's epistles the Bible is silent about Barnabas. Christian tradition however tells us he was the founder of the Cypriot Orthodox Church and died a martyr's death at Salamis in his home country of Cyprus.

If Paul had had his way John Mark would have ended up on the scrap heap as a failed missionary, but through the encouragement of his cousin Barnabas he went on to be an important figure in the early Church and the book he penned has had an immeasurable influence on the world – the Gospel According to St Mark.

God took a sharp disagreement between these two giants of the early Church and turned it into something good.

Sometimes conflict is almost inevitable, because when strong personalities rub each other the wrong way, sparks can fly. And it doesn't always end up with in a good way.

Two giants of the 20th century evangelical world, John Stott and Martyn Lloyd-Jones, had a major difference of opinion not dissimilar to that of Paul and Barnabas. In October 1966 Stott chaired the National Assembly of Evangelicals and Lloyd-Jones was the keynote speaker. The Welshman gave an impassioned plea for all to leave their doctrinally mixed denominations and form a new fellowship of evangelical Churches.

While the delegates were on the edge of their seats ready to 'jump ship' John Stott did something unprecedented as a chairman – he publicly criticized and contradicted what Lloyd-Jones had said. He told the delegates it was better to remain in their denominations as salt and light from within.

Stott later apologised for his interjection but a rift had occurred, a split between Anglican and other evangelicals which has taken over a generation to heal.

I often wonder what John Stott's reaction would be today with the current state of the Church of England?

Sometimes, however, a conflict can bring a major change which is good for the whole world.

Five hundred years ago a German monk who had an unsalvable conscience and wore out his father confessor, finding no inner peace, made a discovery that transformed his life and that of the Church. Martin Luther realised we do not have to strive after salvation, it is a free gift of God's grace received by faith.

Luther never intended to split from Roman Catholicism but when his ideas became widely known he was summoned to what is hilariously called the 'Diet of Worms' to renounce his new-fangled theology. Instead he defended his findings according to Scripture, and said, 'Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.'

And so began the great Protestant Reformation with the proclamation of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone which has encircled the world ever since.

And which is why all of us are here today.

To God alone be the glory. Amen.