

Chapter 38: Godly Disagreement

Acts 15:36–41

In the first part of Acts 15, the church handled a massive disagreement at the Jerusalem Council. The question of whether Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved was an attack on the gospel itself, and the church's repudiation of the doctrine cleared the way for the expansion of the gospel without that obstacle. Yet, disagreements in the church come in many shapes and sizes, sometimes on questions that cannot at all be settled by appealing to any specific passage in the Bible. How should Christians move forward in ministry when they cannot agree on how to move forward *together*? In this short passage, we see that *Christ builds his kingdom through disagreement*.

Godly Goals (Acts 15:36)

At the end of the previous section, Paul and Barnabas had “remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also” (Acts 15:35). We considered two implications of this verse. First, whereas the short-term ministry of Judas and Silas had come to an end, Paul and Barnabas engaged in a longer-term ministry in Antioch to build up the church. Second, Paul and Barnabas engaged in training up “many others also” who could help them to preach the word of the Lord. In this transitional moment, we see the far-sighted leadership development of Paul and Barnabas as they prepared others to take their place when the Lord called them on to the next assignment.

Luke does not tell us precisely how long this transitional time lasted: “And after some days...” (v. 36a). Polhill notes that “The imprecise time expression is perhaps more significant as Luke’s way of marking a major new division in the narrative. A new division indeed does begin at this point—Paul’s second major mission.”¹ Before venturing into new territory, Paul and Barnabas determine to “return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord” (v. 36b). Bock observes that a particle left untranslated in the English (δέ; *dē*, meaning “indeed” or “certainly”) suggests “some intensity” behind the request. Previously, we had seen Paul and Barnabas visiting the churches they had planted on their way back to Antioch, strengthening and encouraging those disciples as they went (Acts 14:21–26). Here, after the extended work settling the case with the Judaizers with the Council of Jerusalem, and then “after some days” that have now passed back in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas want to return to these churches to “see how they are” (v. 36c). At this fragile stage, Paul knew these churches were vulnerable.² The reference to the “word of the Lord”

¹ Polhill, *Acts*, 341. Peterson quibbles with this division of the sections: “More precisely, however, it forms the first part of a bridge (15:36–16:5) between events following the Jerusalem Council (15:30–35) and Paul’s entrance into fresh territories (16:6ff.). At this stage, he simply revisits churches planted on the first journey, to strengthen them by delivering ‘the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey’ (16:4–5).” (Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 446–47.)

² Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:84–85.

not only describes what Paul and Barnabas had proclaimed while in those cities, but also what they were preaching while in Antioch (Acts 15:35). Schnabel notes that this phrase “illustrates Paul’s focus on Jesus, Israel’s crucified, risen, and exalted Messiah and Savior about whom he preaches (objective genitive) and who is the source of the message that he proclaims (subjective genitive).”³

Godly Disagreement (Acts 15:37–41)

While Paul’s suggestion seems to raise no objection, the details become complicated. Luke matter-of-factly reports that “Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark” (v. 37). Bock reminds us, “John Mark is Barnabas’s cousin (Col. 4:10), a detail Luke does not note.”⁴ This detail perhaps explains some of the reason that Barnabas wished to give John Mark a second chance on the mission field after deserting Paul and Barnabas back in Acts 13:13. Yet, we should also remember that it was Barnabas who had vouched for Paul after the latter’s conversion (Acts 9:27). Even before Paul/Saul had converted to Christ, Luke had informed us that Barnabas’s name means “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36). Thus, it is entirely in line with Barnabas’s character for him to advocate for someone whom others doubted.

Paul, however, had a different opinion on the wisdom of taking John Mark: “But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work” (v. 38). The concern is understandable: “A man who failed once at a crucial time might well fail again.”⁵ Even so, Luke does not take a clear side in this dispute. As Bruce writes, “in view of Luke’s restraint, it is idle for us to try to apportion the blame for the dispute.”⁶

Although Luke does not take sides in this dispute, he nevertheless reports the difficulty of this disagreement in frank terms: “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” (vv. 39–40). Bock expands on the word translated as “sharp disagreement”:

The term *παροξυσμός* (*paroxysmos*), when used negatively, describes anger, irritation, or exasperation in a disagreement (BADG 629 §2; BDAG 780 §2). In Heb. 10:24 it is used positively of stimulating or stirring someone to love, but it is also used of God’s wrath and of how Paul was provoked at seeing idols. The uses for God’s wrath show how strong in force the term can be—this is a major disagreement.⁷

In spite of the depth of the two different convictions, it is not necessarily the case that the disagreement involved “passionate and bitter words, of hot tempers and anger. Paul and Barnabas were not men of that common, cheap type.”⁸ Ultimately, the disagreement was so significant that Paul and Barnabas separated from each other.

³ Schnabel, *Acts*, 661–62.

⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 519.

⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 633–34.

⁶ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 318.

⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 519.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 634.

Although this separation may have been disappointing, we should also notice how the separation was fruitful and restorative. Far from ending their ministries, Paul and Barnabas ended up covering more ground, so that “there were two missions instead of one.”⁹ More, this arrangement paired each experienced minister with a less experienced minister. Paul seems to have come to respect Silas from the latter’s ministry in Antioch for “some time” (Acts 15:32–33).¹⁰ Yet, Mark was not left behind: “Mark made good with Barnabas in Cyprus. Eventually he became one of Paul’s helpers, Col. 4:10; and how dear he became to Paul we see when Paul was facing his end in the Roman prison, II Tim. 4:11. We also see him with Peter, I Pet. 5:13, who calls him his son. He wrote the second Gospel and did it as the mouthpiece of the Apostle Peter.”¹¹ Paul and Silas in particular were “commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord” (v. 40).

As he goes out, Luke tells us that Paul “went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches” (v. 41). We do not have much knowledge of how these churches had been started; however, Peterson is probably right that “Galatians 1:21, 23 indicates that some of Paul’s earliest evangelistic endeavours were in the region.”¹² Before moving on to new churches, Paul insists upon making sure that these churches are growing well in the word of the Lord.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the “word of the Lord” (v. 36; see also Acts 15:35)? In what sense does this refer to the word *from* the Lord? In what sense does this refer to the word *about* the Lord? What role does the teaching and preaching of the word of the Lord play within the life of the church? Why would Paul feel the need to return to churches where they had previously “proclaimed the word of the Lord” to “see how they are” (v. 36)?
2. What had John Mark done on the last journey (Acts 13:13)? What different reasons might Barnabas have had for wanting to bring John Mark on this next journey (Acts 4:36; 9:27; Col. 4:10)? What reason did Paul not want to bring John Mark along (v. 38)? How might both sides have advocated for their position from the Scriptures? Why would either side struggle to articulate a definitive answer from the Bible for their position?
3. What should we make of the “sharp disagreement” between the two (v. 39a)? What should we make of the separation from the two (v. 39b)? How did Mark eventually turn out (Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11)? What kind of an opportunity did this represent for Silas to grow as a minister of Christ? How did the church offer their approval for this arrangement? How did the whole work get done jointly through their separation?
4. What are the kinds of issues on which godly Christians may not disagree? On what kinds of issues might godly Christians legitimately disagree? Under what circumstances might those disagreements be so pronounced as to require Christians to separate as they continue forward in ministry? How

⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, 341.

¹⁰ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 319.

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 635.

¹² Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 449.

should they esteem those who legitimately separate? How do instances of godly separation fit with Christ's call for his church to be "one" (e.g., John 17:11)?