

Kingdom Work
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Acts 15:36-16:10

Opening: Given the divisiveness of this election season, do you expect any tension with family members or friends at the Thanksgiving celebration? Because the world is made up of flawed humans, conflict is inevitable. We could even say that disagreements can be productive if handled correctly. Why are disagreements between close friends or family members particularly hard? How can we keep disagreements from tearing apart our relationships? How can followers of Christ deal with disagreements in a way that glorifies Him without damaging the reputation of His church?

Years ago, a song by Dave Mason summed it up this way:

*“So let's leave it alone, 'cause we can't see eye to eye
There ain't no good guy, there ain't no bad guy
There's only you and me and we just disagree”ⁱ*

That song was about choosing an amicable romantic split rather than a bad breakup. Bad breakups are not only about romance; they can also happen between family members, friends, even fellow followers of Christ engaged with each other in ministry. To prevent a bad breakup over a disagreement we often say we must “agree to disagree.”

Any idea where that phrase came from? Ironically, since we are studying a biblical passage, the saying came out of a disagreement between two prominent Methodist preachers in the 1700s: George Whitefield and John Wesley. Though the two men had theological differences over the doctrine of predestination, to maintain their friendship, they both said they would “agree to disagree” on non-essential doctrine while remaining unified on the essentials.ⁱⁱ That brings to mind another old saying. They chose to “disagree without being disagreeable.”

The two Methodists from the 1700s were not the first to agree to disagree in order to maintain their relationship. In today's text we will see how God in His sovereignty turned a disagreement between the Apostle Paul and his ministry partner Barnabas into an expansion of ministry rather than a bad breakup. They would disagree but not allow that disagreement to hinder the cause of Christ. We will also see how Paul, (strong-willed by nature) could be adaptable and flexible when God directed a change in plans.

The point: When we are serving God, disagreements can arise, methods might need to change, and God might even shift the focus of our mission. We need to be agreeable when there is disagreement (on non-essentials), adaptable when methods must change, flexible when the Holy Spirit opens a new door for ministry and above all, we must remain focused on God's purposes no matter what transpires.

36 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." 37 Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 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. 39 And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

- Verse 38: What (or should we say who) was the disagreement about?
- This was NOT a disagreement on essential doctrine. It was a personnel issue.
- What are examples of "essential doctrine" we should NEVER compromise on?
- Here is some good reading on this: <https://www.gotquestions.org/essentials-Christian-faith.html>
- What are examples of "non-essentials" that some tend to treat as essential?
- Here is some good reading on this: <https://blog.truthforlife.org/five-nonessentials-of-the-christian-faith>
- Though this dispute was not about essential doctrine ("*Love me, love my cousin!*") emotions were strong enough that they went their separate ways.
- What they did NOT do was allow their differences to hinder the spread of the gospel. God simply took two great preachers and formed TWO ministry teams.
- We might wonder if hard feelings lingered. We need not wonder.
- Barnabas did not go back to Antioch and start posting on Facebook about how SOME PEOPLE are unreasonable. Mark did not post on X that he was so misunderstood. We never read about Paul badmouthing either of them.
- "Paul would later affectionately mention Barnabas as worthy of monetary support in his work of proclaiming the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:6)."ⁱⁱⁱ As for Mark, Paul wrote to Timothy, "*Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.*" (2 Timothy 4:11)
- Warren Wiersbe stated: "*God changes His workmen, but His work goes right on. Now there were two missionary teams instead of one! If God had to depend on perfect people to accomplish His work, He would never ever get anything done.*"^{iv}
- The lesson: Followers of Christ can agree to disagree on non-essential matters and still fulfill God's purposes if we keep His purposes in focus as the priority.
- Agreeing to disagree should come with a mutual commitment to ensure that God's work must continue unhindered.
- Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:1-3: "*...walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*"
- He also wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:23-24: "*Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone.*"
- In other words, Christians can disagree without being disagreeable.
- When circumstances call for it, we also must be adaptable.

16:1 Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. 2 He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

- If we've studied the letters of Paul in the New Testament we are familiar with Timothy. What do you know about this young man? What do verses 1&2 tell us?
- Why would Paul's circumcision of Timothy be surprising? Look at Acts 15:1-2.
- The most obvious irony of Paul sanctioning the circumcision of Timothy is the fact that he and Barnabas had just come from the "Jerusalem Council" (see 15:1-31.)
- That pivotal event is worthy of its own study, but it resulted in a letter stating that circumcision was not necessary for a Gentile convert to be saved. That was the message of Paul's Second Missionary Journey.
- Later Paul wrote, *"Look! I, Paul, tell you that if you have yourselves circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you."* (Gal.5:2) He also wrote: *"...Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek."* (Gal. 2:3).
- Paul was ADAMANT that circumcision was not necessary for salvation.
- This was not about Timothy's salvation (he is called a disciple); but ministry.
- Timothy was "half-Jewish" (his Mother's faith) but never circumcised because his (late) father was Greek. Because of his dual heritage Timothy had a unique opportunity to reach both Jews and Gentiles for Christ. However, as one commentator states: *"To be accepted in ministry to Jews, Timothy had to affirm his Jewish heritage and be circumcised."*^v
- John Piper writes, *"...in Timothy's case, what was at stake was how unbelieving Jews might best be won to Christ. So just as Christian freedom caused Paul to resist Titus' circumcision, this same freedom allowed him to remove the stumbling block of Timothy's lack of circumcision. Paul applied his principle from 1 Corinthians 9:20, "To the Jews I became a Jew in order to win the Jews."^{vi}*
- Paul also wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:22: *"I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some."*
- Paul was adamant on doctrine but adaptable on circumstances to reach more people for Christ. How often do churches or even followers of Christ become stubborn about cultural issues and refuse to adapt to win more people to Christ?
- Like Paul we must never compromise on biblical doctrine, but we must be willing to adapt in the "non-essentials" for the sake of reaching more with the gospel.
- God honored Paul and Timothy's adaptability. Verse five tells us: *"...the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily."*
- Paul was not only adaptable, he knew when to be flexible about his plans.

6 And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. 8 So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

- Paul had definite opinions about where he should go in his second missionary journey, but he was flexible when the Holy Spirit changed the plan.
- *“Let’s go here!”* The Holy Spirit said, *“No not there!”* *“Let’s go here instead!”* The *“Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.”* *“Okay, let’s try Troas!”* *“You’re getting warmer, Paul. Go to Troas and wait for further instructions.”*
- We might ask, “Why didn’t God want them to go to those places?” We are not told and the scripture implies they were not either. Sometimes God does not give answers just instructions. He’s God, we are not, we need to trust Him.
- Skip Heitzig said, *“God’s NO is as important as God’s GO. Closed doors are one of the ways God leads us.”^{vii}*
- So they went to Troas and waited for instructions from God.

9 And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10 And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

- The change of direction took the gospel message to Europe.
- What is the lesson for every preacher, pastor, evangelist, church and individual follower of Christ from how Paul responded in those verses?
- G. Campbell Morgan wrote, *“It is better to go to Troas with God, than anywhere else without Him (Morgan, 377).”^{viii}*
- Paul and his ministry partners were constantly attuned to the Holy Spirit’s direction and willing to be flexible when the Spirit changed their plans.
- *“Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails”* (Proverbs 19:21).
- There is every indication that Paul was doing what God had called him to do but for some reason God in his sovereignty changed the plan.
- Here’s the question for us: Do we strive to stay “in step” with the Holy Spirit and are we willing to be flexible when God changes our plans?
- Paul was strong-willed by nature, yet soft-hearted about the Spirit’s direction.
- Minor note: In verse ten Luke used the plural pronouns “we” and “us.” Luke himself had joined in the journey at this point.

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- If ever there was a practical passage to prepare us for the twists and turns of serving Christ, this is one of them!
- Let’s summarize what we’ve learned from the Apostle Paul in these verses.
- When we are serving God, disagreements can arise, methods might need to change, and God might even shift the focus of our mission.
- We need to be agreeable when there is disagreement (on non-essentials).
- We need to be adaptable when methods must change.
- We need to be flexible when the Holy Spirit opens a new door for ministry.
- Above all, we must remain focused on God’s purposes no matter what transpires.

ⁱ <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/davemason/wejustdisagree.html>

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agree_to_disagree

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://christiancourier.com/articles/the-separation-of-paul-and-barnabas>

^{iv} Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible exposition commentary (Vol. 1, p. 466). Victor Books.

^v Holman New Testament Commentary on Acts

^{vi} <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-was-timothy-circumcised>

^{vii} <https://youtu.be/eEbG4QwxoSE?si=4RC71heLcffGpfvG>

^{viii} Holman New Testament Commentary on Acts/Morgan (377)