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Disagreement between Paul and Barnabas

15: 36-41

50 AD

Disagreement between Paul and Barnabas DIG: Who do you think was right in this dispute? Paul or Barnabas? Why? Is it possible for one not to be “wrong” and one to be “right,” but simply to have an honest difference of opinion? What was the result in this split between the two?

REFLECT: What goes through your mind when people you greatly admire show sides of themselves that you’ve never seen before, when they appear oh-so-human? When have you had a difference of opinion with another believer and decided to part ways? What happened? If it’s not about the fundamentals of the gospel, is it all right to disagree? What is the advantage in majoring in “the majors” (the fundamentals of the gospel) and not majoring in the minors? What happens when you get sidetracked in minor issues that have to do with our freedom in Messiah? Have you ever made a snap judgment of someone’s motives while standing on the outside looking in? Why is this so wasteful and dangerous?

At this strategic moment in the history of the Church, when it began to radically change from a movement within Judaism to a predominantly Gentile movement, two of its most important visionaries could no longer see eye to eye and parted company. **Luke** gives us no indication why the conflict between **Paul and Barnabas** could not be resolved. But, **Barnabas** turned out to be right in **his** assessment of **his** cousin **Mark**. After a few more years of discipling with **the son of encouragement**, early church tradition says **Mark** ministered with **Peter** and wrote a New Covenant gospel. Eventually, **Paul** changed **his** mind about **Mark**, writing to **Timothy**, “**Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service**” (**Second Timothy 4:11**; also see **Colossians 4:10** and **Philemon 23-24**). Although **they** never ministered together again, we know that **they** eventually reconciled **their** differences, because **Paul** later wrote approvingly of **Barnabas’** ministry (**First Corinthians 9:6**).³⁵³

After some days teaching and preaching in **Syrian Antioch** **Paul** said to **Barnabas**,

“Let’s return and visit the brothers and sisters in every city where we have proclaimed the word of the Lord in the **First Missionary Journey, to see how they are doing and disciple them” (15:36).** It is probable that the **days** spent by **Paul and Barnabas in Syrian Antioch** was over the winter months and that the coming of spring, with the consequent opening up of travel routes by land and sea, stirred **Paul** to fresh activity. **Paul’s** proposal was for a **return to visit** the areas already evangelized, and in the light of the letter to the **Galatians** we can understand one of the reasons that made **him** propose such a journey.³⁵⁴

As **he** had just done earlier in **Chapter 15**, **Luke** once again indicates that the early Church was not without its heated **disagreements**. **Barnabas was planning to take along his cousin John, called Mark. But Paul** kept on **insisting that they shouldn’t take him along - the one who had deserted them in Pamphylia, not accompanying them in the work** of evangelism. But, **Barnabas’** desire to take **Mark** with **them** was surely motivated by the wish to let **the young man** prove **himself**. This can be traced to **their** family relationship, which **Luke** does not mention (**Colossians 4:10**); but, to the sympathetic character of **Barnabas**, a people person, of which **Luke** has already given **his** readers good evidence (**9:27**). It was as if he was saying, “Come on, Paul, give the kid another chance!” **Barnabas** did a remarkable job in helping to turn around the life and ministry of **his** young cousin. **Paul**, however, was concerned about the mission and was unwilling to take a doubtful partner. **He** was a perfectionist, the “do-or-die” person, the “get up and keep punching” guy, intense, and was more concerned for the success of the mission. In **his** mind, **Mark** had blown **his** chance, leaving **them** shorthanded on the **First Missionary Journey (13:13)**. It was as if he was saying, “The kid’s not dry behind the ears! A quitter! Excess baggage!”³⁵⁵



Therefore, a lengthy, **sharp disagreement** (Greek: *paroxysmos*, meaning *anger, irritation* or *exasperation*) **took place, so that they split off from one another**. While **Paul** evidently considered a spiritual principle to be at stake, **Barnabas'** passion is probably fueled by family loyalty to **his** cousin. **Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus (15:37-39)**. With that note, both **Barnabas and John Mark sailed** off the pages of the book of **Acts**, never to be heard of again. From now on **Acts** would focus on **Sha'ul/Paul**.

Just a couple of years earlier, **Barnabas** had been **carried away with hypocrisy** at the church in Syrian Antioch with regard of not fellowshipping with the **Gentile** believers there (see the commentary on **Galatians, to see link click Bb - The Antioch Incident**). The defection of **Barnabas** was of a far more serious nature with regard to **Gentile** freedom than the vacillation of **Peter**. **Barnabas** was **Paul's** chief collogue in the evangelism of the **Gentiles**, and now to have **him** play **the hypocrite** and deserter, was a bitter blow to **the great apostle**. This may have been prepared the way for the dissension between **them** which two years afterwards led to **their** separation.

There is no doubt that **ADONAI** used this division, but this can never be casually used as an excuse for carnal division. **God** can redeem good out of evil, yet we are all held accountable for the evil we do, even if **the LORD** brings good out of the evil in the end. Either **Paul** or **Barnabas** - probably both - had to get this right with **Ha'Shem**, and **they** eventually did.³⁵⁶

Despite their disagreement here, we know that **Paul and Barnabas** remained friends (**First Corinthians 9:6**, written during the **Third Missionary Journey, Colossians 4:10**), and later **Paul** was even reconciled to **John Mark (Colssians 4:10; Second Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24)**. This shows that a disagreement does not require a break of fellowship. But there was one positive side of this disagreement. Instead of having just one missionary team, there were two; one comprised of **Barnabas and John Mark** and the other composed of **Paul and Silas**.

Since the prevailing custom was for missionaries to travel in pairs (**8:14-17** and **9:32-33**), **Paul** looked for a second traveling companion. Thus, **Paul**, summoning **Silas** from Jerusalem, **went out, being entrusted by the brothers and sisters to the gracious care of the Lord (15:40)**. His choice of **Silas** indicates that **the two men** had become well acquainted during **Paul's** visit to Jerusalem (see **Bs - The Council at Jerusalem**), and **Silas'** teaching and preaching at **Antioch**.³⁵⁷ As with the **First Missionary Journey**, **they** were sent out from the church at **Antioch**. The church also probably sent out **Barnabas and John Mark** with **their** blessing as well. **Silas** was also known by his Roman name of

Silvanus (Second Corinthians 1:19; First Timothy 1:1; Second Timothy 1:1). He was a leading believer in the Messianic community in Jerusalem (**15:22** and **27**), **he was a prophet** and had the gift of prophecy (**15:32**).

Paul selected a new partner, **Silas**, a leading man of the church, **a prophet (15:22 and 32)**, and one chosen to take the Jerusalem council's decrees to the churches (**Acts 15:27**). **Silas** is probably a Greek version of the name **Sha'ul**. **He** was a contributor with **Paul** of the letters to the church at Thessalonica, and **he** was the secretary for **Peter's** first letter (**First Peter 5:12**). Like **Paul**, **he** was a Roman citizen (**16:37**).³⁵⁸

This was a wise choice in many ways: (1) **Silas** could speak for the Messianic community in Jerusalem and make clear that **Paul** was not at odds with them regardless of what the party of the circumcision may have said when they visited **Galatia**; (2) **he** could interpret the decree in **16:4**, a matter of no small importance for Paul's ongoing ministry to the Gentiles; (3) as **First** and **Second Thessalonians** and **Second Corinthians 1:19** were to show, **Silas** was a capable coworker, and probably also a secretary for two of **Paul's** earlier letters; (4) it appears from **16:37-38** that **he** was also **a Roman citizen (16:37)**, as was **Paul**, which would be especially useful in colony cities like Troas, Philippi and Corinth.³⁵⁹

They both went through Syria and Cilicia since the decrees from the Jerusalem council were originally addressed to all the churches in those areas, **strengthening the communities** with discipleship (**15:41**). Just as **Barnabas** began **his** second missionary journey in **his** hometown of Cyprus, **Paul** began **his** **Second Missionary Journey** in **Cilicia**, where his home town of **Tarsus** was located.

The LORD changes **His** missionaries, but the mission goes on. Now there were two missionary teams instead of one! If **ADONAI** had to depend on perfect people to accomplish **His** will, **He** would never get anything done. Our limitations and imperfections are good reasons for us to depend on the grace of **God**, for our sufficiency is from **Him** alone: **We are not competent in ourselves, but our competence is from God (Second Corinthians 3:5)**.³⁶⁰

Like **Paul and Barnabas**, we may sometimes find ourselves strongly disagreeing about matters that relate to ministry. But differing convictions don't have to become razor-sharp arguments. Here is a four-step plan for dealing with conflicts between believers:

1. Identify the real source of the argument: **Job** asked the relevant question, "Is there no end to your futile words? What compels you to answer [me in this way]" (**Job 16:3**). Ask **the Ruach ha-Kodesh** to shed light on the true source. Sometimes we believe

that conviction is the motivation for our differing views until we allow **God** to reveal our selfishness or unwillingness to change. Part of spiritual maturity is risking our position in favor of the will and glory of **God**. Let's be willing to allow **Him** to shed light on any selfish or worldly view.

2. Submit the issue to God: James exhorts us to, “submit to God. But resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). An important part of giving anything to **God** is taking everything from **the Adversary**. Paul tells us **not to sin** in our **anger** and thereby give **the deceiver** a foothold (Ephesians 4:26-27). **The ruler of demons** has a field day with our arguments and quarrels. When we ask **ADONAI** to remove all selfish, worldly motives and influences of **the enemy**, issues often either disappear or downsize themselves to a workable level.

3. Resist the temptation to sin in your anger: Anger in and of itself is not sin. It is an emotion, and sometimes a very appropriate emotion. But unfortunately, anger heightens the risk of wrong actions and words. Each of us regrets something we've said or done in anger. Let's ask God's help when we are angry at another believer so that our feelings do not turn into wrong actions.

4. Pray for (and if possible, with) the other person involved: Prayer changes things and people! **Philippians 4:6** invites us to pray about everything. Can you imagine how defeated **the enemy** would be if two divided church leaders or laymen got down on their knees together and prayed for **God's** glory? We don't have to be together on every issue, but we can be together in prayer!

Lord, let our love keeps growing in knowledge and every kind of discernment, so we can determine what really matters and can be pure and blameless in the Day of Messiah , filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:9-11), accepting one another, just as Yeshua also accepted us, to the glory of God (Romans 15:7).³⁶¹