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The Blessing of Separation

Text Acts 15:36-41

The proposal was a simple one: “Let’s go, Barney, and affirm the believers in the cities we have visited. Let’s go see how they are doing, spiritually.” Paul’s proposal was that he and Barnabas check in on the young saints (v. 36).

Barnabas (called Barney by his friends?) thinks it’s a good idea and wants to bring Mark along on the trip.

Awkward.

Paul does not want John Mark to accompany them on the trip. Mark has been a disappointment. When the team was in Pamphylia, John left them and returned to Jerusalem (13:13).

Paul saw this as desertion. Here is a first century version of two colleagues agreeing to disagree. Note that the difference in opinion regarding what to do with Mark did not stop the ministries of Paul and Barnabas. In fact, their disagreement gave us an additional ministry team. There are now four traveling, instead of two. Barnabas teams up with Mark and Paul then teams up with Silas. Difference in points of view need not destroy a ministry. The dissension was not over doctrinal issues. They were not parting because of beliefs regarding the centrality of Christ or the Person and work of the Holy Spirit or the nature of faith. Theirs was a personnel issue.

Verse 40 tells us that Paul and Silas were *affirmed* by the brethren.

How ought we handle a disagreement in the faith community?

Assuming it is not a disagreement over an essential tenet of the faith, there is a model here from which we might glean some help. If our disagreement is doctrinal, there is a more complex protocol that must be applied. There is contention here. The Greek word used, in verse 39, for *contention* is *paroxysmos.* It refers to sharp disagreement. The word is used only one other time in the Greek New Testament. It is translated as *provoke* or *stir up* in Hebrews 10:24. What are we to do when we have a sharp disagreement, a contention, a paroxysmos?

1. Make your position clearly known. “Barnabas was determined...” (v. 37). “But Paul insisted...” (v. 38). There is no doubt and no confusion about where each man stood, regarding John Mark. Neither Paul nor Barnabas are dropping subtle hints. They *clearly* state what they want to see happen. No one is well-served if we hold our opinions in. What bothers you? What upsets me? Who are the people who wouldn’t fit, in my opinion? What isn’t working well? Say it. Name it.

1. Make a decision in light of your position. I greatly admire the lack of a long discussion here. Perhaps there was a lengthy discussion that Luke chose not to include in the historical record. I get the impression that Paul and Barnabas made their positions known, chatted it up a bit and then acted. “And so, Barnabas took Mark....” (v. 39). “...but Paul chose Silas... (v. 40). This is so refreshing. These men are acting like adults!! Later on, Paul speaks of Barnabas warmly (1 Corinthians 9:6; Colossians 4:10).

John Mark is Barnabas’ cousin (Colossians 4:10). Barnabas is an encourager (Acts 4:36) and wants his cousin to do well in ministry. Paul later says that John Mark is useful to Paul for ministry (2 Timothy 4:11). John Mark is not a throwaway. He is not a nobody, good for nothing. He is a servant of the Church. He was simply not, in Paul’s opinion, a good fit for *this* trip, for *this* ministry, for *this* missionary journey. We must be careful not to assume that if a person is not a good fit for a particular task, they are not fit for *any* task. This is the last we will read of Barnabas or Mark in the book of Acts. Note that after their disagreement is articulated, Paul and Barney act! It is possible to talk a disagreement to death and do little or nothing. These preachers talk AND act.

**Conclusion**

There might be a blessing in separation, a benefit in disagreement.

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| Several years ago, I met a gentleman who served on one of Walt Disneys' original advisory boards. What amazing stories he told! Those early days were tough; but that remarkable, creative visionary refused to give up. I especially appreciated the man's sharing with me how Disney responded to disagreement. He said that Walt would occasionally present some unbelievable, extensive dream he was entertaining. Almost without exception, the members of his board would gulp, blink, and stare back at him in disbelief, resisting even the thought of such a thing. But unless every member resisted the idea, Disney usually didn't pursue it. Yes, you read that correctly. The challenge wasn't big enough to merit his time and creative energy unless they were unanimously in disagreement! Charles Swindoll, Living Above the Level of Mediocrity, p.107. |

Out of this text has come something good. The disagreement between Barnabas and Paul sparked new movement in the missionary ministry of both of them. Now we have two teams. Now Barnabas will visit Cyprus. Paul will visit Syria.

Did you note the last line of the text? Rather than being torn asunder because the leaders disagree, the first century Church is *strengthened*!

What a blessing.

Amen