

*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday May 7, 2023

Lesson 7: The Impact of Leadership Conflict

Reference: Acts 15:35-41

When we last saw Paul, he and the church leaders in Antioch were confronting bad theology brought forth by Pharisaic Jewish Christians. The confrontation created great dissension and uneasiness in the church to such extent that the church sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to seek a firm resolution. After much debate, the church in Jerusalem affirmed the theology that salvation is by grace alone without any need to abide by any Jewish traditions. Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with a letter from the church leaders in Jerusalem affirming such theology, accompanied by Judas and Silas.

Events of Acts 15:35-41

Having just resolved a tense situation and bringing about peace and unity in the church, Paul and Barnabas continued to lead pastoral ministries in the church, preaching and teaching the Word of God (15:35).

Some time later, Paul wanted to visit the churches that they had planted in their recent missionary trip. The two super-pastors agreed to the journey, but disagreed on the details; specifically, details regarding ministry team members. Luke recorded only a basic entry that the disagreement is rooted in the selection of John Mark to be part of the mission team. As it relates to the nature of the disagreement, Luke used a Greek term (παροξυσμός) that conjures images of violent anger and strong indignation. The English word 'paroxysm' is derived from the same Greek word, and is also used in the Greek version of the OT in the context of God's wrath (Deut 29:27). In short, this was not a friendly disagreement. To others at the church, this issue may seem trivial. But to these two super pastors, this issue was very much personal.

Scripture is silent on the details, impact, and fallout from this disagreement, as the focus of the inspired text is on the expansion of the gospel message to the Gentile nations. However, the following inferences can be made based on simple hermeneutical observations:

- **Conflict severely damaged relationship between Paul and Barnabas** – Paul and Barnabas had largely enjoyed a close friendship dating back to Paul's conversion and his first visit to Jerusalem. The two super pastors went through a rough journey that included both heavy persecution and praise in the Gentile nation, which would likely have solidified their bonding as friends. Although church tradition indicated that Paul and Barnabas made peace later in life, the two super pastors were never seen doing ministry together – ever – again.
- **Conflict led the church to lose two pastors** – Most scholars and commentators acknowledged that this parting was God-ordained; nonetheless, it cannot be overlooked that the outcome of this intense personal argument between two key pastoral leaders at this church meant that both had to go their separate ways, and never pastor at this church again. Paul would later visit this church very briefly between his second and third missionary journey – two years after this conflict, and Barnabas' ministry activities after this conflict was not preserved for us by the Holy Spirit, though church tradition indicates that he would lead successful ministries in Cyprus and in North Africa.
- **Conflict revealed that even men of Godly character can be fallible** – By all accounts, Paul and Barnabas were men held in high regards who possess genuine godliness in their teaching and in their lives. Of all things to argue over that would lead to a broken friendship while also shutting down a solid teaching ministry, this one seemed rather petty. Godly leaders are not infallible.

With the benefit of history, we can also make the following observations and inferences about who was right / who was wrong regarding the object of the conflict – John Mark:

- Paul would be wrong about John Mark, as he would later win the trust of Peter (1 Pet 5:13) and penned the first gospel in the New Testament bearing his name. Mark would also later become a great help to Paul's ministry (Col 4:10), being the one Paul sought out in his last days (2 Tim 4:11).
- In spite of the many nasty things Paul must have said about Mark during the conflict with Barnabas, for Mark to later become such a strong ally to Paul's ministry can very likely be attributed to one source: Barnabas' mentorship. Luke tells us that after the conflict, Mark went with Barnabas towards Cyprus, and was thus mentored by Barnabas. The fruit of that mentorship led Mark back into Paul's world to become a strong ally for Paul. Though Scripture is silent on this mentorship details, the inference is clear. Barnabas kept God's ministry above his personal feelings.

Swindoll's Principle for all ages

This Lesson focuses on those occasions where ministry leaders strongly disagree, and the impact that their improper actions have on the local church ministries. Swindoll's work (Chapter 12) included two sets of principles for us to digest; the first set focuses on the disagreement itself, while the second focuses on how we should approach such matters based on Swindoll's own life experience.

On leadership disagreements, Swindoll noted the following principles to observe:

- **In every disagreement, there is one issue but several viewpoints** – In this particular episode, the issue was John Mark. This was objectively true. The viewpoints, however, are subjective. Paul and Barnabas each have their own viewpoints, and the intense dispute was over disagreement on viewpoints (subjective matter), not objective cause.
- **In every disagreement, each side has validity** – When the dispute involves subjective matter, neither side can claim an objective "win." The goal would be to move beyond subjective disputes.
- **In heated disagreements, someone usually gets hurt** – The more intense the argument, the deeper the wounds. In this particular episode, imagine John Mark listening to the dispute, then recognizing that he was the reason the church parted ways with two of its super pastors.

On the applications, Swindoll proposes the following principles to abide by when ministry leaders engage in tense exchanges that threatens to derail ministry. Included in these applications are three qualities that Swindoll noted as necessary but difficult in such circumstances: Honesty, Objectivity, Humility.

- **When in a disagreement, work hard to see the other point of view** – The first step requires an intentional effort dedicated to listening that leads to understanding. In tense disagreements, we tend to listen looking for angles to attack. We should be listening to understand.
- **When both sides have validity, seek a wise compromise** – In tense disagreements, compromise are often viewed as a weakness to one's point. Compromise should be embraced, not shunned.
- **When the conflict persists, care enough to work it through, rather than walk out** – walking away from tense disagreements are usually followed by silent, manipulative, passive-aggressive attitude towards one another that benefits no one. Always try to work it out, rather than to walk out.
- **When it cannot be resolved, graciously agree to disagree without being disagreeable** – In Swindoll's words, "Get Over it!" and move on. Harboring animosities and refusing to move on only serves to create more disagreements and more problems. Avoid leaving such matters unresolved. When the parties cannot come to a compromise, learn the principles of grace, embrace humility, agree to disagree, and move on.

Reflecting Upon the Word

Re-read Acts 15:35-41. Take into account all that you have learned about Paul and Barnabas, and their missionary journey together with John Mark from Acts 13-14:

1. From Paul's perspective, what would be the major arguments for insisting that John Mark be left off of the ministry team?
2. From Barnabas' perspective, what would be the major arguments for insisting that John Mark be kept on the ministry team?
3. What else might we observe about the church's reaction to this tense exchange between Paul and Barnabas? What can we observe about John Mark's reaction to this episode?
4. How can we correlate these observations into applications for our church?

Reflecting Upon our World

Church leadership disagreement that reached an unhealthy level is as common in the first century as it is in our world today.

1. How would your church today approach a similar situation where specific church leadership figures (pastoral or otherwise) disagreed to such intensity that it negatively impacted ministry – like it did in Antioch?
2. Beyond the focus on the tense exchange between Paul and Barnabas, this lesson also highlights a key principle that applies to everyone in our world today – the principle of “Second Chances.”
 - a. How would your church approach the same situation where someone had failed to meet expectations in a ministry setting – assumed in a big way like John Mark, but wanted to try again?
 - b. How would your church approach a *similar* situation where someone consistently failed to meet expectations in a ministry setting, but remained in the ministry position because they may have been shielded by “Barnabas” (i.e.. continued investment in “second” chances)?
 - c. How would your church approach a *similar* situation where someone was denied any second chance opportunity due to influences by a vocal member in leadership (“Paul’s”)?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

Reflect on your personal journey, pondering how you may have walked in the shoes of Paul, Barnabas, or John Mark in this lesson...

1. Have you ever found yourself in a ministry situation where you demand (Paul), defend (Barnabas), or stood helpless (John Mark) as others debate your participation in a particular event? Journal your experience and try to correlate it to this episode in Scripture. Try to craft your experience into your own bible study lesson plan.
2. Have you ever had a disagreement so intense that it negatively affected your friendship or relationship with whom you disagreed with? If given a chance, how might you have done things differently? Journal your experience and try to correlate it to this episode. Try to craft your experience into your own bible study lesson plan.
3. Have you ever had an experience in a ministry setting where you disagreed with an individual in that setting to such extent that you chose to walk away from that ministry? Were the conditions favorable to any compromises? Did that experience negatively impact your friendship or relationship? Did that experience create any rifts between you and God? (Note: sometimes, walking away may actually be the God honoring act – as we observed with Barnabas). Journal your experience and try to craft it into a sharable testimony.