

Sermon Series: Viral – good news spreads fast

#6 Coping with Conflict – Acts 15:36-39 5.30pm

Intro – Breaking up is hard to do

Someone suggested to me the other day that under these pandemic conditions that the States of Australia are a bit like The Spice Girls – their trying really hard to get back together ...but Victoria¹ always lets the others down.



What do you think of when I say “Lennon and McCartney”, “Hawke and Keating”, “Johnny and Amber”?

At the close of Acts chapter 15 we have a good old-fashioned breakup – in this case between Barnabas and Paul.²

Verse 39 says, “Their disagreement was so sharp that they separated.”

These two characters were joined at the hip from Acts 11-15...

Think of what Barnabas and Paul/Saul had been through together –

- Barnabas went to Tarsus to find Paul and bring him to Antioch as his apprentice missionary.
- Together they witnessed the growth of the Church among Gentiles.
- There in Antioch of Syria Paul and Barnabas encouraged and taught the churches together.
- They toured together on a rollicking adventure recorded in Acts 13 and 14 where they nearly lost their lives.
- They campaigned together for the grace of the Gospel before the Jerusalem council of church leaders to see Gentile Christians included into the full life of the church with Jewish Christians (Acts 15:22-35).



¹ It's a State of Australia most affected by COVID-19 at present

² **παροξυσμός**, [Hebrews 10:24](#), in different sense, nowhere else in N.T. The verb is found twice, [Acts 17:16](#), [1 Corinthians 13:5](#); in the former passage of Paul's righteous provocation in Athens, and in the latter of irritation of mind as here

So what was it that led to this sharp altercation? Let's look at the passage in context again, Acts 15:36 tells us...

³⁶ ... Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's go back and visit each city where we previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas agreed and wanted to take along John Mark. ³⁸ But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in their work. ³⁹ Their disagreement was so sharp that they separated (Acts 15:36-39).

As you can see, there's a back story here about someone called John Mark. And I'd like to know what put an end to such a great ministry partnership.

It interesting, down the ages...

- generous Barnabas is remembered fondly as an encourager,
- post-Pentecost Peter is venerated as a great leader, and
- John Mark remains a bit of a mystery – but
- Paul, is often labelled as harsh, inconsistent, contesting, divisive. Some would say he was just not "a people person".³

And yet, Paul's compassion and care for people is well documented in the New Testament.⁴ Surely, there is more going on behind the scenes in Acts 15.⁵

Who's who in the missionary zoo

Let's take a moment to profile each of the parties involved:

- Barnabas was a Jewish Christian originally named Joseph, from Cyprus. His new name relates to his generosity and encouragement described in Acts 4.⁶ He was sent to Antioch by the Jerusalem



³ There are others who claim there are "different" Pauls in the New Testament, but further investigation of circumstances Paul finds himself in shows how agile he is as a missionary and leader

⁴ E.g. Paul's personal dealings with Onesimus, a runaway slave (whose Latin name means "useless") reveals how Paul treated him as a brother and leader. Similarly, he named his female co-workers and esteemed the leadership Phoebe of Cenchrea and considered Timothy his "son" in the faith.

⁵ Luke is keen to put Paul on centre stage in his narrative as the new agent of the Gospel's spread.

⁶ Chapter 4

church leaders⁷ and he made Paul his partner in strengthening the new Gentile churches.

- John Mark, we learn from Paul in his letter to the Colossians⁸ was the cousin of Barnabas. Uncle Barny, it seems, took young Mark under his wing on the first missionary journey with Paul. That’s exactly what a generous, encouraging uncle might do - perhaps to help him see the world, find a job, grow up in Christ, etc.
 - But what happened in Pamphylia, stays in Pamphylia. Luke gives no further details as to why John Mark deserted Paul and Barny at that place.⁹ But if blood is thicker than water, as they say, there’s more to the Barnabas/Paul split than meets the eye.
- But we also have to consider the Apostle Peter...
 - Simon Peter is a huge figure in the New Testament
 - Leader of the disciples,
 - formerly known as Simon (his Hebrew name),
 - he later became known as “The Rock” (no, I don’t mean that one!)
 - Jesus re-named Simon as the Rock of Jerusalem
 - That’s sometimes “Cephas” in the Aramaic, or “Peter” in the Greek.¹⁰
 - It turns out that John Mark was very close to Peter. And it just so happens that that John Mark’s mother, Mary, was the one who opened her home to Peter when he miraculously escaped prison and certain death (Acts 12:12). Remember how the believers had gathered there in Jerusalem to pray for Peter’s welfare? Mark would have been there too.
 - John Mark has been thought of as Peter’s protégé and associate:
 - Mark is mentioned in *The First Letter of Peter* as The Rock’s son in the faith¹¹

⁷ Acts 11:22

⁸ 4:10

⁹ Acts 13:13; 15:38

¹⁰ Jesus gave Simon (an Aramaic/Hebrew name) a new name “Peter” which in Aramaic is Cephas (See-fass) and means “Rock” - John 1:42

¹¹ 1 Peter 5:13

- The Gospel of Mark is traditionally thought to be written by this John Mark, from the re-telling of events Peter told him.
- Some even think John Mark gave himself a cameo in that Gospel as the young “streaker” in the Garden of Gethsemane.¹²
- Lastly, we know from Paul’s writings, that relations between Peter and Paul were strained over the important matter of whether Gentile Christians could be fully part of the Church.

Behind the Scenes

Galatians 2 give us some of the backstory we need. Paul writes...

¹¹ But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. ¹² When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn’t eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. ¹³ As a result, other Jewish believers followed Peter’s hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ When I saw that they were not following the truth of the gospel message, I said to Peter in front of all the others, “Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions?”

As you can see, the breakup in Acts 15 was much more than a personality conflict. It seems that Paul’s battle to defend the Gospel of grace was far from over.

In the Letter to the Galatians Paul fights for the right to party for anyone who becomes a Christian! So long as you use your extraordinary freedoms in Christ to promote the well-being of others and the glory of God, you are free indeed, he says.¹³



¹² Mark 14:51-52

¹³ Gal. 5:1

The Letter to the Galatians was written to Christians in places Paul had where many were hostile to the radical Gospel of Jesus.¹⁴

Paul was fighting here for the underdogs; battling against those who worked to make it hard for people to fully enjoy fellowship in the Church.¹⁵

The Right Battle

So, the breakup of the super-team of Barnabas and Paul was actually about whether the Gospel is a free offer for anyone who wants to follow Jesus! That's worth a bit of conflict!

Conclusion

When we go back to where we began, in Acts 15:36 I believe we can say Paul was appealing to Barnabas to come back to the priorities of the Gospel. It must have been hard for Paul. In Galatians 2 he expresses the sadness, saying “*even Barnabas*” was led astray.

When the Gospel was at stake, Paul chose to stand on the side of those most vulnerable; those in danger of missing out on God's grace.

We too will find that church leaders, and Christian activists, sometimes have take a stand for God's Gospel of Grace...

- For example, the battle for the full inclusion of women of faith in all ministries of the church is not over by a long shot. Both sides of the conflict often argue their case based on the Gospel. But who is right? This is a topic worthy of taking a stand and working out thorough, peaceful pathways toward the freedoms I believe Jesus proclaimed.
- Some churches have made progress in articulating how to include believers who identify themselves in LGBTQI+ terms based on the Gospel of grace. This is a battlefield that may at times be fierce and uncomfortable as centuries of culture, politics, and theology are revisited and re-considered.

In each case, we should seek to ensure people matter as much as proper order and theology.

¹⁴ See Acts 13 & 14

¹⁵ Gal. 4:12

We will find, like Paul, that the battle for the unconditional acceptance of “sinners” into God’s kingdom is never over. We will do well to seek peaceful pathways for Christians who don’t get along, so they can still travel together.

At a personal, relational level, Paul’s example reminds us that we too might be put in situations where we must take a stand for what the Gospel proclaims.

Paul was confident that the cross of Christ removes barriers that we humans like to erect to keep the ones who are different away.¹⁶ Sometimes, standing up for the unconditional love Jesus offers might be costly for our relationships too.

For those who like happy endings to conflicted stories, there is a sweet resolution to the conflict of Acts 15. Years later, we find in Paul’s writings, commendations of the same John Mark who was once the problem.

Mark is mentioned later in the New Testament by Paul as a co-worker in the Gospel along with Paul’s friends: Epaphras, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. Paul regarded him as a faithful and helpful supporter.¹⁷

Paul was able to stand up for the Gospel of grace, and at the same apply his seek to live in harmony with others where it was possible.¹⁸ It’s a reminder that the way of Jesus was to stand with the underdog and commend them to God, and to also be the bringer of peace and freedom.

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¹⁶ E.g. Gal. 3:27-29; Ephesians chapter 2

¹⁷ Col. 4:10; Phm. 24; 1 Tim. 4:11

¹⁸ Rom. 12:13