

25 April, 2010

When Church Leaders Cannot Agree

Reading: Acts 12:25; 13: 5, 13; 15:36-41

Let's briefly reacquaint ourselves with two of the greatest Christians of all time.

Paul

Since the day of his conversion on the Damascus Road, Paul's life was one of exemplary and selfless service. He is a no-nonsense person. As Saul of Tarsus, he has inflicted suffering on others. Now he is ready to suffer for the faith himself. Nothing is too much trouble. He is prepared to face danger of every sort--hunger, misrepresentation, flogging, imprisonment, exposure to the elements, and even death (2 Cor 11: 23-29). For single-mindedness and devotion, he has no equal. Debilitating illness can temporarily incapacitate him, but nothing can stop him. If you ask him for his personal mission statement, he can say: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). If you want to know about his philosophy of ministry, he can encapsulate it in the words: "May I never boast, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." (Gal 6:14) A brilliant mind, an unwavering commitment and unflagging energy - that's Paul.

Barnabas

In his own way, Barnabas is every bit as commendable as Paul. On the whole, he seems to be a more likeable man than Paul. He is a Levite and a native of Cyprus. He comes from a well-to-do family. He was a man of some means but voluntarily sold a property he owned and donated the entire proceeds of the sale to the church. He is a big-hearted man, always encouraging others, so much so that the apostles gave the nickname Barnabas, which means "Encourager" - and the name stuck.

It was he who introduced the converted Saul of Tarsus to the Apostles, when all the disciples at Jerusalem were afraid of him, thinking that he had feigned conversion as a ploy to infiltrate and destroy the church. When the apostles heard of a new development at Antioch, they had such confidence in him that they dispatched him to the city to represent them and to ensure that all was well. He is described as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (11:24). While he was there, he realised that the church could derive benefit from the ministry of Paul, so he travelled up to Tarsus, found Paul and brought him back to Antioch. Here is a man who puts God first in his life. He is a man of impeccable integrity and open-handed generosity. His heart is big and his mind is open. He's a positive influence wherever he goes.

A Great Partnership

They served as co-pastors at Antioch. What a team! They then travelled to Cyprus and through Asia Minor. There they went through thick and thin together. After what we may term a very successful missionary journey, they returned to their home church with the great news that the Lord had opened the door of faith to the *Gentiles*. *Side by side*, they continued their teaching ministry for quite some time. *Shoulder to shoulder*, they opposed the legalists who attempted to limit salvation to those who were circumcised. *Together*, they travelled to Jerusalem and there they recounted what God had done through them. When the apostles and elders addressed a letter to the Christians in Syria and Cilicia, Paul and Barnabas were part of the delegation who delivered the letter. And in the letter they were described as “dear friends” of the apostles, “men who (had) risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:26).

After they had delivered the letter, the two missionaries remained in Antioch and exercised their ministry of teaching and preaching together with many others. From all we read, the two were inseparable. They worked hand in glove and they made a great team. Apparently things were going well at Antioch. The church had dealt with a potentially explosive issue, largely as a result of the concerted stand of their two outstanding missionary statesmen. But, Galatia was beckoning.

I. APOSTOLIC BUST-UP

A. The “Convulsion”

Barnabas

Good morning Paul. How was your break?

Paul

Really good thanks, Barnabas. It was great to get some fresh air. I feel rejuvenated and I’m rearing to go once again. In fact, as I have been praying for the disciples back in Galatia, I have felt a growing conviction that we need to go back and visit them. The ministry is going so well here in Antioch but the church has no shortage of teachers and I just wonder how the young believers are doing in the towns where we preached the word of the Lord.

Barnabas

Strange you should say that. I’ve been thinking exactly the same. They were so full of joy and zeal when we left, but who knows what opposition they have had to face since then. We could travel up through Cilicia and head for Derbe and Lystra. After

that we could visit the Pisidian churches and then maybe we could break some new ground. We could even end up in Ephesus.

Paul

Seems like more than co-incidence that we are both feeling the same conviction. I think we should share it with the elders and, if we sense God's confirmation, let's make arrangements to head out.

Barnabas

That sounds really good to me. What I can do in the meantime is to check with Mark and tell him what we plan to do. He might need to clear his calendar . . .

Paul

Mark! Who said anything about Mark? You can't be serious!

Barnabas

Mark is a good man. We've seen him grow spiritually. And he can certainly help us in a number of ways. Remember what he did in Cyprus?

Paul

Aren't you forgetting something? Mark left us in the lurch. He got cold feet and returned home. This is a serious business and we know how dangerous it can be. He's led a pretty protected life. He certainly doesn't have the stomach for this sort of thing. If he could desert us before things got really hot, what do you think is likely to happen if the people want to stone us? We cannot afford to have a weak link on the team. We've been through thick and thin and we know what we're in for. Remember Lystra! How do you think Mark would do in such a situation? I would not be comfortable with him on the team. I don't know how you can even suggest such a thing.

Barnabas

I'm sorry, Paul, but I think you are being harsh and unforgiving. You know how things were in Pamphylia. You were sick and the whole venture looked precarious. Does one never get a second chance in ministry? We've seen Mark mature since then. I'm sure he won't let us down a second time. You, of all people, should know . . .

Paul

Come on Barnabas. That's not the issue here. I'm looking at the situation objectively. It's one thing to be courageous in favourable circumstances, but we can't have someone who will crack under pressure. The task is too important for us to risk another desertion. It's not a question of whether we like Mark or not. He may well

have learned a few things and be growing in grace, but that's not a sufficient basis on which to select missionaries. I'm sorry! Mark can't come!

Barnabas

I'm not sure that I like your attitude. Since when do you take decisions like this unilaterally? Not everyone can be just like you. And, let me ask you, 'Have you never made a mistake in your life?' I think you could do with a bit more understanding and a whole lot more compassion!

Paul

Barnabas, you are missing the point completely! We just can't afford sentimentality here! And there's certainly no place for nepotism! He's your cousin! It's natural that you would want him to join us. And I was quite willing for him to come with us last time. But he's proved that he hasn't got the stomach for it and I am not going to budge on this. No way is he coming with us!

Barnabas

You can be very hard-nosed you know! And quite insulting! I find it hurtful that you accuse me of nepotism? You know me better than that. I'm not sure that anyone can work with you while you're in this frame of mind. You really can be a pain at times! It wouldn't do you any harm to be a little more gracious.

Paul

Barnabas, I tell you, you're wrong! I have never allowed sentiment to interfere with God's work and I'm not going to start now. Mark had his chance and he blew it! There is no way we can agree on this as long as you refuse to listen to reason. And God's work cannot be held up because of your failure to distinguish between policies and people. You seem utterly determined to take Mark. Well, take him then *and go somewhere else*. As for me, I'm going to do what I must. You can go your way and I'll go mine!

Barnabas

Man you're obstinate! So be it, then. If there's to be no Mark, there will be no Barnabas either!

B. They separate

The upshot was that Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus and Paul chose Silas and headed overland for Syria and Cilicia.

C. So, where does that leave *us*?

According to Luke, these two men had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. They were both Jewish. I can see their hands flying. There would have been fire in Paul's eyes and disappointed irritation in Barnabas' voice. These two men, who had been through thick and thin together, could not see eye to eye. And if these two spiritual giants cannot resolve an issue like this, what hope is there for the likes of you and me?

II. BUST-UPS IN THE CHURCH

Those of us who have been around for a while know that, from time to time, things can get pretty tense in the church. Not our church, of course, but other churches! Jesus said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). But we know that, from time to time, there are some serious standoffs in the church. And, of course, we know how to rationalize our differences and to justify our intransigence. Instead of beating ourselves up, let's look at the matter fairly and squarely.

A. Bad Attitudes

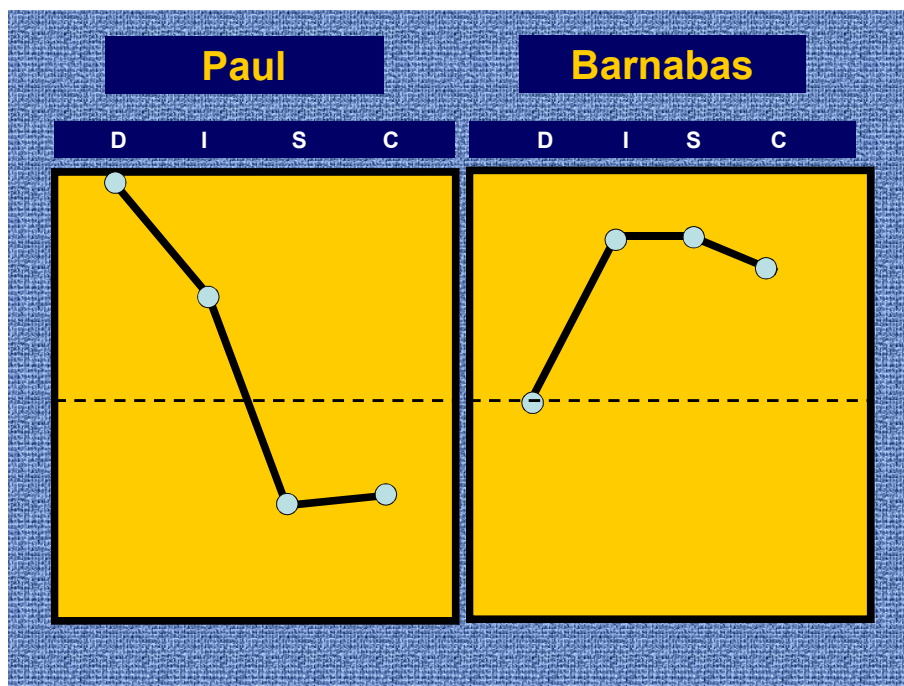
Some differences are as a result of carnality. Somebody is proud or insensitive or self-centred or unkind. John tells us about a man called Diotrephes, *who loved to be first*, started a slander campaign against him and his colleagues and even put people out of the church for wanting to welcome other Christians (3 John 9-10). Paul speaks about people in the church who use smooth talk and flattery and cause division (Rom 16: 17-18). Peter and Jude refer to some conceited troublemakers who masquerade as Christian teachers (2 Peter 2:2-12; Jude 12-14). Where there are such people, conflict is inevitable. But our attention is not on them. It is not even on "good" people who sometimes display bad attitudes. It is on people who love the Lord, are committed to his work but just don't seem to be able to see eye to eye on a matter.

B. Temperament

Some of this is on account of our failure to recognise temperamental differences. I would suggest to you that Paul and Barnabas were very different temperamentally. Let me try to illustrate this by referring to some personality profiling. I am no expert, but I use this for purely illustrative purposes. Many of us have encountered the Myers-Briggs profile. You answer a number of carefully-considered questions and are placed into quadrants according to your personality traits. Even with the limited information at our disposal, I think we are

able to say that Paul and Barnabas would probably have been at the opposite ends of different quadrants.

I can illustrate this difference visually by referring to the DISC analysis developed by Dr William Marston (who, by the way, also developed the lie detector). I took a stab, from what I know of the two men, at charting their personality profiles.



As you can see, the graphs of the two men are entirely different.¹ Of course, no questions were asked. This is a bit of a guesstimate. It doesn't matter whether I have it spot on. It's not as though the one is good and the other is bad. It's just that they are different. And when it came to the question of whether Mark should accompany them on their missionary journey, those differences came to the fore. *Remember, that which made Paul and Barnabas a great team could also pose a real threat to their relationship.*

We do well to value the diversity God has placed within his church. But we also need to remember that that very diversity may also result in differences of opinion when we face certain issues. We are unable to say who was right. Each had a

¹DISC stands for **D**ominance, **I**nfluence, **S**teadiness, and **C**onscientiousness (or Compliance). These terms have specifically-defined meanings. They indicate what motivates us and how we are likely to respond to situations in the workplace. All such profiles are broad approximations. Reality is more complex than can be ascertained by a profile or even a battery of psychometric tests. This one is cited (not actually used) purely for illustrative purposes.

point. A Paul tends to look at people and say: “What can they do for God’s work?” A Barnabas tends to look at them and say, “What can God’s work do for them?” In a sense, perhaps both may have been wrong.

C. An honest difference of opinion

I can see Paul’s point. We are not really in a position to say, “In the long run his position proved to be the wrong one. He had his reasons and it is reasonable to assume that his motives were good. We know nothing about the reasons for Mark’s departure (desertion). There may have been extenuating circumstances. Barnabas may have been unduly sympathetic, but he may have taken the position he did because he had good reason to do so. We cannot say for certain who was right. Perhaps we are not meant to know.²

D. There is a happy ending to this story.

This is not the last time Paul refers to Barnabas. Subsequent references show that he continued to hold Barnabas in high esteem. Years later, when he writes to the Corinthians, he refers to Barnabas in favourable terms as his partner in God’s work (1 Cor 9:6).

And this is not the last time Paul refers to Mark. During his first imprisonment in Rome, Paul writes to the Colossians: *“My fellow prisoner, Aristarchus, sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. You have received instructions about him. If he comes to you; welcome him”* (Col 4:10). He also describes Mark as he “fellow-worker” in his letter to Philemon (Philemon 24). Most significantly, during his second imprisonment in Rome, Paul corresponds with his protégé, Timothy. Listen to his request: *“Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry”* (2Tim 4:11). Apparently Mark had more than proved himself. Or, should we say, Paul had learned a thing or two?

One more thing! Paul’s request to bring Mark to him was made to a young man who came to be his spiritual son and protégé in interesting circumstances. When he and Silas reached Lystra, shortly after the bust-up, they were introduced to a young disciple. The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him. *Timothy would probably never have been drafted had Mark been around.*

It certainly seems that God overruled in this situation. Two teams instead of one were sent out. And Timothy came on the scene. God is able to use everything,

²The fact that Mark later proved himself to be dependable does not, in itself, mean that Paul was mistaken in taking the stand that he did.

including sin, to bring about his purpose. That's part of what we mean when we speak about his providence. It does not, of course, excuse their fierce disagreement. It shows how God can bring great good out of such a situation.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were never a disagreement in a church, especially among leaders? Of course, it would. We should do everything we possibly can to avoid harmful clashes. Differences of opinion should never be acrimonious. But, if we disagree, disagreement should not develop into a permanent rift. Love can overcome the most serious differences of opinion.

In this church, we value unity. It can never be optional in any church. I believe God is working to make us into a more loving community than ever before. We believe that true unity is the work of God's Spirit. It is not dependent on personal affinity. It is far deeper than that. If we always agreed on every detail, that very agreement may be indicative of an unhealthy state of affairs. Unanimity is seldom attainable among thinking people who have the courage of their convictions. But we can respect one another and we ought to ensure that nothing is allowed to permanently disrupt our unity in Christ (Eph 4:1-6).

To be more specific, if we are to "make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace," we ought to know ourselves and act lovingly and responsibly (Eph 4:3). Do you identify with Paul in temperament? Make sure you go easy on the faltering Marks of this world! Young Mark was probably acutely aware of his failure. Be careful not to increase their sense of shame and humiliation. Are you a Barnabas? Don't allow sentiment to cloud your judgement. But, whatever you do, keep on encouraging people - especially people who have faltered and failed. Are you a Mark? Don't write yourself off. Someone, whom you respect, may have done so. God may graciously have placed a Barnabas in your life. He hasn't written you off. More importantly, God hasn't written you off. Fortunately for all of us, he doesn't discard his errant children!

Conclusion

Most importantly, disagreements among genuine Christians should never harden into resentment. The love that unites us "is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Cor 13:5).