**It Doesn’t Have to Be That Way**

I began by asking 6 volunteers to form a circle. As expected, they all faced inward. So I ask “Why?” There were a few humorous answers, but basically it’s because that a natural thing to do.

It’s not right or wrong. It just is. It’s human nature to look inward. From our earliest days we learn to take care of ourselves. Generally speaking, looking inward isn’t a bad thing. It’s a matter of personal responsibility. I’m responsible to take care of myself. So it’s natural for me to look inward. This is true of individuals and of groups, and of churches.

However - Inward focus can become a problem when I’m someone disagrees with me or believes something differently than I believe. If I’m TOO inwardly focused, it’ll create division between that other person and me.

Have you noticed that in our society today, if one person disagrees with another, the one calls the other degrading names and insults his/her intelligence? The other then judges the one to be evil and dismisses his/her ideas without further thought.

It doesn’t have to be that way. I think we can disagree. I think we can agree to disagree. And we can accept irreconcilable differences without hatred.

Last week we talked about how the Apostles and Elders met to determine if Gentiles can be Christians without following the traditions of the Hebrews. After heated debate they settled the issue and called each other brothers.

The next thing recorded in Acts 15 concerns Paul and Barnabas. Two good friends and effective co-workers in the cause of Christ, Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement over whether or not to take John Mark on their next mission trip. It’s much easier to be magnanimous with unconditional love when you’re arguing about policy than it is when the difference involves personal relationship.

These two men were a perfect match. Paul was a strong teacher with a leader’s temperament; Barnabas was the encourager, the supporter, the one who affirmed. Together they were a dynamic duo in mission.

Paul said, *Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.* Acts 15:36 Barnabas was all in. Verse 37 says *Barnabas wanted to take John also called Mark with them*.

John Mark had hooked up with them in Antioch and travelled with them from Antioch to Seleucia and Cyprus and Salamis. He was with them when they preached through the whole Island of Paphos, but when they left Paphos for Pamphylia, John Mark left the mission and returned to Jerusalem. Now, as they began a second mission trip Barnabas wanted to include John Mark again, but Paul didn’t.

Paul didn’t want a dropout. He saw John Mark as a quitter. We’re not told why John Mark had left the first trip. Was he homesick? Was he scared following the confrontation with Simon the sorcerer? Or was he just not cut out for mission trips?

Whatever was the case, Paul saw it as a character flaw and he didn’t want that negativity on this trip.

Barnabas on the other hand, saw potential in John Mark. Instead of seeing a young man who doesn’t measure up, Barnabas saw a man that needed to be affirmed and encouraged. Remember, he did that for Paul in his early days as a Christian.

A fair translation of verse 37 is that Barnabas “*was determined*” to take him along. Βουλομαι includes a strong sense of purpose. When I say, *I want to play with my grandson*, βουλομαι is the word I would use. I mean that I have a strong sense of purpose – I intend to play with Malachi.

Some people think that Barnabas wanted John Mark because they were cousins, but I don’t think that’s a fair treatment of Barnabas. The man had proven integrity. This was Barnabas’ affirming, uplifting, and encouraging nature. If a man falls down you don’t kick him, you help him up.

Barnabas was firm in his desire to include John mark. Paul was equally firm in his resistance.

One of the things that I admire about the Bible writers is that they weren’t afraid to include the warts and scars of the men and women of God. This was clearly an ugly episode that Luke easily could have excluded.

Can you imagine an author today writing about someone he likes including a story as negative as this? Bill O’Reilly was soundly criticized for including negative stories about Ronald Reagan in his book Killing Reagan.

Verse 39a, *They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.* “Sharp disagreement” is παροξυσμος. We get the word “paroxysm”.

In case you suffer from hippopotamonstrousequippedaliophobia let me explain paroxysm. In English it means an emotional filled attack or a sudden increase of violence. In Greek it carries the idea of cutting as with a sword or sickle.

Their disagreement quickly got heated. Not quite violent but certainly angry and uncomfortable.

Luke was neutral as to who was right or wrong. He didn’t assign responsibility to one or the other, nor did he try to put one in a good light and the other in bad. He just reported the facts.

Let’s see this in context. These guys had recently enjoyed a great victory for faith in the Great Church Fight about the inclusion of Gentiles in Christianity, a conflict that ended with everyone calling each other brothers. Now they couldn’t settle their difference. They cut each other off.

The text says, *they parted company*. We would say they split, or divorced. There’s nothing pretty about this. They separated.

Verses 39b-41, *Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.* (Do you think the church in Antioch was glad to see them go?)

Barnabas encouraged John Mark. He kept the young man involved in faith work. Where Paul would give up on him, Barnabas helped him redeem himself. And John Mark did well. Eventually he spent a lot of time with Peter, listening to his stories about walking with Jesus. John Mark penned the first of our four Gospels.

Notice something, Even in the midst of such a terrible disagreement, Paul and Barnabas didn’t disparage or besmirch each other. You’d expect that they would hate, or at least greatly dislike each other. It doesn’t have to be that way.

Paul and Barnabas were looking outward. Rather than focusing on themselves and their personal feelings, they focused on the mission of Christ.

Because of this God was able to “*work for the good of these two men who loved Him and who had been called according to His purpose*.” (Romans 8:28) Instead of one mission trip, now there were two. Barnabas and John Mark went one way and Paul along with Silas went another.

So what have we learned from this?

         We’ve learned that sometimes there are issues which cannot be settled agreeably.

         We’ve learned that sometimes we find ourselves with irreconcilable differences.

         And we’ve learned that even with irreconcilable differences we can part ways still as brothers in the cause of Christ. We don’t have to hate each other.

This is very personal to me. There’ve been a lot of people who were part of this congregation but then, due to a disagreement with me or with the Elders or with some other church member, they parted company, moving on to a different congregation. Unfortunately, now if we cross paths at Kroger or Arts in the Park they avoid me like I’m some sort of pariah.

It doesn’t have to be that way. We can choose to go separate ways without hatred or disparaging. We can be like Paul and Barnabas, looking outward to the mission of Christ and each continue our calling to make disciples, teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded.

The Bible doesn’t tell us how Paul and Barnabas came to their agreement to disagree. It also doesn’t does tell of bad blood one toward the other. Paul and Barnabas never worked together again, but Paul did write positively and respectfully of Barnabas in his letters, and he reconciled with John Mark. When Paul was in prison in Rome Mark was with him, and in 2 Timothy 4:11 he said of Mark, *he is helpful to me in ministry*.

More important than “How did they do it?” is “How can we do it?” How can we disagree, even to the point of parting ways, without being disagreeable?

The first thing I would say is that we can’t do it without the power of the Holy Spirit. All the good works recorded in the Book of Acts were done through the power of the Holy Spirit.

         The church settled the issue of Gentiles being Christians through the power of the Holy Spirit.

         Paul and Barnabas settled their difference through the power of the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit who is ready to help us.

That said, I have some suggestions. They’re more practical than specifically Biblical but I’m confident they’re consistent with what the Bible teaches and with what we see modeled by these early great leaders.

Three realities to remember:

1.    In every disagreement, although it may revolve around a single issue, there are several viewpoints.

Consider the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. There was a single issue – should they take John Mark with them on a new mission trip? But there were two differing viewpoints. Paul viewed a dropout; Barnabas viewed potential for ministry.

Viewpoints are subjective. They’re how we each look an issue from our perspective. Our perspective has a lot to do with what we believe about an issue.

If you’re married you’ve experienced this with your spouse. If you’re a parent you’ve experienced this with your child. You each view an issue differently which may cause disagreement. Too often that disagreement results in a fight. It doesn’t have to be that way.

I picked up this definition from another preacher: *A disagreement is a conflict that involves an issue seen from opposing points of view*. If we bear that in mind it can help us avoid fighting.

2.    In disagreements, usually both sides have a valid point.

Usually both sides of a disagreement have strengths and weaknesses to their viewpoints. Seldom does one side have a slam-dunk position. One of the things that keeps Americans from constructive debate is that people tend to think their position is a slam-dunk and then conclude that the other is stupid or dishonest.

It doesn’t have to be that way. We could honestly believe that the other person has valid ideas to be considered; each side has strengths and weaknesses.

3.    When disagreements get heated, someone usually gets hurt. The more intense the heat, the deeper the wounds.

People often say, or write insulting and hurtful things about someone with whom they disagree. You can’t take it back. Words once spoken or written cannot be withdrawn. They cut like shrapnel creating wounds, some deep and jagged. These wounds are often slow to heal - and sometimes never heal.

It doesn’t have to be that way. If we allow the Holy Spirit to work through us, we can keep the temperature and pressure down when we disagree.

With these realities in mind, here are four strategies we can apply to our disagreements:

1.    Work to understand the other’s viewpoint.

It’s not always easy to understand a person with whom we disagree. It’s a lot easier if we honestly listen. Try to understand his heart and his particular context. Don’t assume that she’s stupid or evil. She may have a good reason for her viewpoint.

2.    Seek a wise compromise when both sides have valid viewpoints.

David Augsburger, a professor and author in the area of Pastoral Counseling wrote, “*Conflict is natural, and everyone should be willing to come part way in an attempt to resolve things… Compromise is a gift to human relationships. We move forward on the basis of thoughtful, careful consensus and compromise in most decisions in conflict*.”

I can think of several ways Paul and Barnabas could have compromised about John Mark.

         They could have taken him on probationary status.

         They could have taken John Mark and a few others in case he failed.

         They could have given him a test assignment.

Unless someone is absolutely wrong, a compromise can usually serve to mitigate a disagreement.

3.    When disagreement persists, care enough about the other person to work through the disagreement rather than walk away.

Running away seldom solves an issue. Our thought should be, “*How can I maintain my relationship with this brother?*” This isn’t easy. It’s in fact among the most difficult things we’ll ever be called upon to do. We’d like to cut the person off, give her the silent treatment, turn our backs on him. That’ll never solve a disagreement.

If you choose to care about him, choose also to do the hard work of finding a peaceful solution.

4.    When no resolution can be found, graciously agree to disagree without being disagreeable.

That’s what we saw with Paul and Barnabas. Verse 39 says simply, *they parted company*. There’s nothing in the Bible to suggest that they carried animosity against each other. Barnabas never attacked Paul. He never bad-mouthed him. Nor did Paul ever disparage Barnabas. In fact, as I said earlier, Paul wrote positive things when he mentioned Barnabas in some of his letters.

In the end, many if not most disagreements can be resolved, but when they can’t, we can part company without hatred, if we’re focused outward on the cause of Christ and not inward on our personal agendas.

Very quickly, some random thoughts:

a.    Forgive. No matter how hurt you are, it won’t help if you carry a grudge.

Remember how Jesus said, *Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they’re doing*. Luke 23:34 If anyone ever had a right to carry a grudge, this was it. Jesus chose instead to forgive. As we live in the forgiveness of God, we can also forgive those who have hurt us in disagreement.

b.    Pray specifically for that person with whom you disagree. It’s pretty hard to hate someone when you’re praying for him. Before you say something to or about him, try praying the words.

Unless you’re as callous as a barefoot soccer player, you won’t be able to say hateful things in prayer. You may still disagree and you may still feel that she’s absolutely wrong. So leave it in God’s hands.

c.    Finally, Get over it. Focus outward, on the cause of Christ. There’s enough to keep us busy that we won’t have time to fret over past disagreements.

With the Holy Spirit working in us we can work through disagreements in a way that continues the mission of the church. Even when we choose to go separate ways, we can do so with mutual love and respect.

Paul and Barnabas did. We can also.