

SPLIT DECISION

ACTS 15:36-41 JULY 8, 2020

After World War I, Rudolf Dassler and his brother, Adolf, started sewing shoes in the laundry room of their parents' house in a little town in the middle of Germany. "Their big breakthrough came at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin." Athletes wearing their shoes, including Jesse Owens, won seven gold medals, not to mention other silver and bronze medals.¹

Production ceased during World War II, their factory was converted to make weapons, but then shoes were made again after the war ended. But, in 1948, "after over 30 years of working together," the brothers shut down their shoe company and separated.² Instead of *one* family shoe company, *two* new companies were formed in their little German town. Adolf decided to combine his first and last name and called his new company: *Adidas*. Rudolf settled on the name *Puma*. And what followed was a quarrel that lasted for *decades*, even past the death of the brothers themselves.

No one is sure what *exactly* led to the falling out. One story is that there was a simple misunderstanding over something Adolf during a stint inside a shelter while waiting out British bombers.³ Others cite family strife which finally boiled over after many years of everyone living so close together. The result was a net benefit for shoe enthusiasts and, more than that, historians call their town after the split the "cradle of the sporting goods industry."⁴

In Acts 15 we see an argument between two brothers that leads to the shocking end of their partnership. It is, perhaps, the most famous disagreement in all the Bible. Paul and Barnabas clash over whether John Mark should be part of a second missionary journey into the Gentile world.

Commentators have just as many opinions as we do when we hear about a fight like this. Some say they were both right. Some say they were both wrong. Some say Paul was being unforgiving and unChristlike, others say Barnabas was blind to reality because of his affection for his nephew. We're given a good amount of information, but what we're *not* given is comment *from* the Holy Spirit about who was "right" and who was "wrong." Because of that, we should take care when we read through this situation. When Paul and Peter had their showdown in Galatians 2 about how Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles, the Bible makes it clear: Peter was just wrong. But in this case there are no such verdicts. And yet, for all the things the Dr. Luke *skips* as he tells these stories of church history, a fair amount of text is dedicated to this falling out without assigning blame to either party.

So, what should we make of it? First, we are given a very simple but important lesson that *unity*, though an important goal that *every* Christian and church should be striving for, is *not always possible*. Even among the apostles, who were laying down the foundation of the Church, perfect unity was not always achieved.⁵ Second, as we see this situation play out, rather than join one side or the other, we can examine the conduct of each party and examine the wake left behind them. That will be infinitely more profitable than trying to assign blame in a 2,000 year old disagreement.

We begin in verse 36.

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-puma-and-adidas-rivalry-divided-their-founding-town-for-70-years-2018-10>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dassler_brothers_feud

³ http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2089859_2089888_2089889,00.html

⁴ Business Insider

⁵ CSB Study Bible Notes

Acts 15:36 - ³⁶After some time had passed, Paul said to Barnabas, “Let’s go back and visit the brothers and sisters in every town where we have preached the word of the Lord and see how they’re doing.”

In the interval since the Jerusalem council, the church at Antioch had experienced many good days of ministry. Eventually, Paul got it in mind that he’d like to go back out and once again visit the places they had been before.

Many commentators say he was motivated by “wanderlust,” that Paul just didn’t want to stay in the same place for too long. The beloved Dr. Ironside goes as far as saying that this was *not* the leading of the Holy Spirit, since Paul faced lots of bumps along the road of this trip. I find it remarkable that we can, with one breath, commend Paul for his courage and endurance and faithfulness to the word of God, but with the next accuse him of being out of step with God’s leading.

There’s no need to accuse Paul of faulty motivation. In the New Testament, including Acts, what we see is that there are times when God gives people or churches a dramatic and unique leading to go out and do some specific work that He has in mind. Some new venture, some special opportunity that might only come along at a distinct point in time. But then, when we’re not on special assignment, we’re still Christians meant to be about the Lord’s business, doing everything we do as unto the Lord, discovering good works to walk in.

It’s exciting to look at Acts and see that God can use any one of His people to accomplish eternal goals. You can be in Antioch or in Jerusalem or in Galatia or in Samaria. In a palace, in a prison. You can serve God and minister across the street or in darkest Peru. Young people, old people. Rich people, poor people. You can be on a desert road with no one around, or you can be by the sea or you can be *IN* the sea and you can do ministry. These believers in Acts didn’t need a particular set of circumstances before they made it *their* business to be about the *Lord’s* business. Like Paul, we have *freedom* in Christ to say, “Let’s go,” as long as we’re still in obedience to the Lord and in line with His word.

We should also notice this about Paul’s plan: The trip he wants to take is *not* really to go and plant new churches. Now, he would end up doing that work, but his *idea* was to go back where they had been. I point that out because often people say that Paul was always being strategic in how he did ministry. That he went to big, urban cities because he knew he’d have a bigger impact there. One commentator writes: “Paul’s spirit was ever-forming some new scheme for the advancement of Christianity.”⁶ And, from this perspective is born this idea that the church needs to be “planting” X number of churches a year, or that certain, “significant” cities need strategic attention. All I’m saying is that Paul doesn’t say things like that. He didn’t set out on a church-planting trip on *this* occasion. This was a follow up.

Paul liked following up. We see that characteristic in some of his letters. He talks about wanting to come back and visit again. He didn’t set out from a numeric perspective, but from a desire to benefit people. He wanted to build people up and help them on their walks with the Lord. In the next chapter we’ll see that part of his goal was to spread the news about the Jerusalem Council, so that other Gentile believers wouldn’t be tripped up by legalists that might come to town.

Acts 15:37 - ³⁷Barnabas wanted to take along John who was called Mark.

⁶ Joseph Benson *Commentary Of The Old And New Testaments*

John Mark was Barnabas' nephew. He had started with Paul and his uncle on their first missionary journey, but that hadn't worked out. Now, it seems he's back in Antioch and Barnabas wanted to put him in the lineup again.

Before we get to the conflict, let's notice that both Barnabas and Paul had hearts that were *burdened* for other people. In *this* situation, Barnabas had a great burden for John. He wanted to strengthen him and get him serving the Lord again and have him be a part of God's work.

Paul *also* had a burden. His was for these young Christians in Syria and Galatia. He was concerned about their spiritual lives. He wanted them to become healthy, thriving Christians as well.

Both burdens were *good* burdens. Both reflect the heart of Jesus. Sometimes, Jesus would see a mass of people and His heart would be moved because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Sometimes there would be a group of people clamoring for Him outside the door, but He'd say, "We've got to go to *another* town." Other times, with a very little time to spare, He'd spend a morning cooking fish so He could restore one disciple back to fellowship.

I'm so *glad* that God put a burden on Paul's heart, because it led to him bringing the Gospel west into the continent of Europe. And I'm so *glad* He put John as a burden on Barnabas' heart, because John Mark would go on to do remarkable things in God's power, not least of which is *write* the second Gospel in our Bibles! Both of these burdens have direct impact on our lives today.

We're told here that Barnabas "wanted" to take his nephew along. The word means he was "determined." His mind was made up. Barnabas was no greenhorn. He was a hardcore, battle-scarred, field tested missionary. Clearly he understood the risk he was taking in bringing John along again. He knows there's a chance that he might have to pick up the slack or carry the weight that John might drop when things get tough. But he's willing to do it. And this is why we love Barnabas - because he's the Son of Encouragement. He is not only willing to deal with problematic situations, he's willing to deal with problematic *people*. When no one in Jerusalem wanted to have anything to do with Paul, Barnabas said, "I'll co-sign. I'll sponsor this guy." That's great grace. And that's sometimes what is required if we want to actually help refine people and develop them as disciples.

But was Barnabas just giving John a pass because they were family? I think the record speaks for itself. While this is the last passage in *Acts* where we see Barnabas or John, we know that this young man went on to powerful, faithful service to the Church and to Paul himself. In the last letter he wrote, 2nd Timothy, Paul says to Timothy, his beloved son in the faith, "I'm about to die. When you come to see me, *bring Mark with you*, for he is useful to me in the ministry." If everyone had shunned John Mark and refused to restore him, what chance would he have had to become the minister he did? Thank God for Barnabas and his work in that life.

But, here's the other side.

Acts 15:38 - ³⁸ But Paul insisted that they should not take along this man who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone on with them to the work.

Paul isn't wrong in what he's saying. In the movie *Inception*, the wealthy financier of the team declares that he wants to tag along on the heist. The response from the operatives is: "There's no

room for tourists on this job.” He goes anyway and promptly takes a bullet to the stomach when the plan goes wrong.

A trip with Paul was not for sight-seeing. There was a good chance they wouldn’t survive. And, in the mean time, we’re talking about people’s eternal destinies. This is not a training simulation, this is a live-fire operation deep behind enemy lines.

When it says Paul “insisted,” we see he had as much resolve as Barnabas had. It’s a term that means Paul judged it not good, or counted John as unworthy. We might protest and say, “Wait a minute, Paul, *none* of us are ‘worthy’ to go and serve the Lord.” That’s true. But, think about it this way: There are certain physical demands placed on soldiers before they’re launched into battle.

The quintessential image is “the wall,” right? In all those TV and movie montages, the recruit has to get over the wall, otherwise they’re not in. Or, we can think of how, in certain jobs, like law enforcement or teaching, if you have a criminal record, you’re not going to get hired when you apply.

It’s not that Paul is getting revenge for how John bailed on them a few years ago. He doesn’t say, “You know, me and John just don’t *gel*.” He’s got a very specific complaint. His concern is practical. They had to travel light. Everyone had to do their part. And he was focused on the people out there needing ministry. He was focused in on the *audience* out there. Barnabas was looking at the *associates* of the ministry. Both are valid targets and worthwhile efforts. But, in this case, they became mutually exclusive.

Acts 15:39-40 - ³⁹They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed off to Cyprus. ⁴⁰But Paul chose Silas and departed, after being commended by the brothers and sisters to the grace of the Lord.

When Adolf and Rudolf Dassler split apart, the each set up their new shoe companies on either side of the river that ran through their town. And, because most of the townsfolk worked at one company or the other, the town itself was divided for decades. “Puma and Adidas families went to separate bakeries, had their own separate butchers, as well as their own separate pubs.”⁷ “Puma people did not date Adidas people, let alone marry them.”⁸ The division was so real that “residents became known as ‘Bent Necks’- you always looked down at someone’s feet to see which trainers they wore before deciding whether to speak to them.”

This disagreement between Paul and Barnabas meant the end of their partnership. They parted company, but they didn’t portion up the church. They didn’t form two different congregations. Barnabas didn’t make sure to hang around Antioch to tear down Paul once he left on his trip. Nor was there an ancient “space race” to see who could get to the towns in Cyprus or Galatia first. Instead, they graciously went off in different directions, demanding nothing for themselves. So, even though they weren’t working shoulder to shoulder, they were still cooperating, not competing in the Lord’s business.

The fact that there was no sanction from the church, no call for reconciliation, suggests that they were still handling themselves with Godliness and grace. Remember: This church was sensitive to what was right and what was true. They were willing to do arbitration. This debate between Paul and Barnabas *must* have been very public. It’s like Simon and Garfunkel breaking up. But there’s no

⁷ Business Insider

⁸ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/6215542/Adidas-and-Puma-bury-the-hatchet-after-60-years-of-brothers-feud.html>

pressure from the church for them to come to the table and make up. Instead, we're told they commend Paul and Silas to the grace of the Lord. Some commentators see that and jump to the conclusion that Barnabas must've been wrong since he *wasn't* commended, but it doesn't say that. Luke is telling *Paul's* story at this point of the book. He's no longer telling Barnabas' story or Peter's story for that matter. No need to villainize anyone.

No, Barnabas sailed back to Cyprus, his home island, to do the checking in on the towns and Christians there. Church history tells us that he served God faithfully and powerfully until he was put to death for his faith in Christ. We're told John Mark was there when it happened and that he buried his uncle and then carried on in his own ministry to the Lord. These are remarkable, admirable men.

Paul wasn't going to head onto the field alone, so he put a call out to a new acquaintance: Silas. It would've been impossible for him to know just exactly what he was signing up for, though he was going to find out quite soon, but Silas became a great partner and dear friend to Paul. If you ever see a fellow named Silvanus in your Bible, that's the same guy. It seems he also served alongside Peter, helping deliver his epistle.

Acts 15:41 - ⁴¹He traveled through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Paul experienced a lot of hurt in his life, but we see him faithfully carrying on, moving forward in his walk with the Lord. There were people out there who needed strengthening. Christians who needed nourishment and encouragement and care. I'm sure it hurt to have to watch such a dear friend sail away, but, in God's grace, Paul was able to continue and keep serving.

This most famous argument in the Bible shows us that agreement and unity is not always possible, even among Christians. And, that's ok. If we're disagreeing in a right way, in a Godly, Biblical way, there might *not* be a resolution or a bridge built over the issue. *But*, when we come into a situation like this, we're *not* to act like the Dassler brothers, we're to act like Barnabas and Paul. They didn't turn their friends or church into rivals. They weren't giving their hearts over to bitterness or revenge. Instead, their joint force for good became two meaningful missions in the work of God. Because they were not 'bent necks,' looking down at the human level of who was right and who was to blame. Their focus was upward to the high call of heaven. And rather than be motivated by spite, they were motivated by a burden to reach out to those who needed spiritual help. And what their example proves is that *all* of us, in any place, can follow the same pattern, living out our Christianity in grace and purpose, not *always* in perfect harmony with how God is leading others, but always in love, cooperating, not competing, magnifying God in whatever ways He makes available to us.