



GETTING
ALONG
WITH
EACH
OTHER

RICHARD L. STRAUSS

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The Word to the World

Getting Along with Each Other

Richard L. Strauss

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PO Box 1028

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phone: (563) 585-2070

email: ecsorders@ecsministries.org

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BROKEN FRIENDSHIPS

WOULDn'T IT BE GREAT if we Christians could always get along with each other? We have so much in common—one Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ; one revealed Word from Him; one body of which we are all members; one common desire to glorify Christ; one common goal to share Him with others. And yet we seem to have a reputation for misunderstandings, disagreements, dissension, and division.

We've all witnessed little cliques, gossip, and hard feelings between Christians. We're all aware of church splits, the formation of new denominations, and the proliferation of para-church organizations that often overlap in their aims and purposes. We've all observed crumbling marriages among professing Christians. We must admit that Christians do not always get along very well with one another. How can it be?

I would like to explore that question by examining an intense disagreement between two great and godly men in Scripture. These men were close friends and fellow workers. It was a disagreement that resulted in the parting of their paths and the fracturing of their friendship. It is not a pretty story. In fact, it is rather sad. It never should have happened.

**God uses us
despite our
weaknesses.**

But I, for one, am glad it did, and I am pleased that God saw fit to include the account of it in His Word. It helps us to know that the great heroes of the faith were human, just like us. When we see what God did through them *despite* their weaknesses, we know there is hope for us. And by examining their mistakes, we will also see how to maintain harmonious relations with our own fellow workers.

A Genuine Friendship

Their relationship began in earnest when a great number of Gentiles in Syrian Antioch came to know Christ through the preaching of refugees from Jerusalem (Acts 11:19–21). This turn of events disturbed some of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. They were not ready to accept Gentiles into the fellowship of the church, and they wanted to send someone to Antioch to investigate the situation. Barnabas was their obvious choice. He was a Jew (of the tribe of Levi), so he knew the law and understood the Hebrew mind. He was raised on the island of Cyprus, so he spoke Greek, understood the Gentile mind, and would not inadvertently offend them. He was highly regarded as a good man, generous, gracious, and godly (Acts 4:36–37).

It proved to be the right choice. Barnabas remained there, and the work in Antioch prospered. “Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord” (Acts 11:23–24). The

work prospered to such a degree that Barnabas could not handle it by himself any longer. The believers in that local church were too young in the Lord to be elevated to positions of leadership, so his only recourse was to reach outside for help.

He knew just the man. As far as we know, he had first met Saul of Tarsus in Jerusalem three years after Saul's supernatural conversion on the Damascus road. Everybody else in Jerusalem was afraid that Saul had come to spy on them and lay plans for his next attack against them. But Barnabas believed in him. He reached out to him, encouraged other leaders in Jerusalem to accept him (Acts 9:26–29), and a genuine friendship was born. After those days in Jerusalem, Saul returned to his home town of Tarsus, from which he penetrated all the surrounding Gentile areas with the gospel. Word kept filtering back of his powerful ministry (Gal. 1:23). Saul of Tarsus was the man Barnabas needed in Antioch. “And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11:25–26). A great team ministry was born.

Together they served the Lord with great blessing. They seemed to fit together and complement each other well. When the church in Antioch decided to send relief money to the famine-stricken Christians in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Saul delivered it together (Acts 11:30). Together they returned to Antioch (12:25), where three others had been added to the staff (13:1). But Barnabas and Saul continued to serve the Lord there, together.

When the Holy Spirit gave directions for the first organized foreign missionary thrust, we're not surprised to hear Him say, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (13:2). Thus they entered a new venture together. It was a fruitful ministry of evangelism and church planting—a magnificent spiritual success. What a team! They returned to Antioch to report what God had done and then continued to minister there, together (Acts 14:26–28).

When the false doctrine of salvation by works began to infiltrate the church, these two men stood against it, together (Acts 15:2a). When it was decided to send representatives to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles and elders about the problem, these two men were asked to go, together (Acts 15:2b). Together, they declared what wonders God had done among the

Many things can strain our relationships—things we may easily overlook.

Gentiles (15:12). And when a decision was reached and a letter was sent from the apostles and elders to the churches, it said, “It seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15:25–26). “Our beloved Barnabas and Paul!” That about says it

all. They were genuine friends whose team ministry had brought great blessing to the church and inspired great admiration and affection. When they finished their assignment, they returned to Antioch and continued teaching and preaching the Word of God, together (Acts 15:35).

A Growing Tension

Two things happened during those years of team ministry which may have put a strain on their relationship—things we may easily overlook. First, the leadership of the team changed hands. There is no question that Barnabas was the original leader. He was the first shepherding leader of the church of Antioch. He held the respect of the people there. He personally brought Paul in to help with the ministry. His name consistently appears first in those early years for a reason. When the five members of the group of workers are listed in Acts 13:1, his name is first, Saul’s last. The Holy Spirit put him first in the call to missionary service (Acts 13:2), and he is still listed first as the journey progressed (Acts 13:7). He was the recognized leader.

But something happened on that journey. Away from the environment of Antioch where Barnabas was the recognized leader, Saul (now called Paul) began to assume the lead. His stronger personality and more prominent gifts seemed to make it a natural thing. He was the one who confronted a sorcerer named Elymas and kept him from further hindering the gospel (Acts 13:9–12). By the time they finished their ministry on Cyprus, Luke called the team “Paul and his companions” (13:13). It was now “The Apostle Paul Evangelistic Association.” That was quite a change, and rather sudden.

Paul’s leadership was even more evident in the synagogue at Pisidia (13:15–16). We hear no protests from Barnabas, nor do we see any outward indication of bitterness, resentment, or hard feeling. But we must wonder if deep in his soul Barnabas did not feel a little hurt about it. Did he think Paul came on a little too strong, that he insisted on having things his way, that he failed to consider the feelings of others? If so, did he ever mention it to Paul?

The second incident that put a strain on their relationship was an isolated occurrence at Antioch shortly after the council at Jerusalem. We learn nothing about it in Acts, but Paul tells us about it years later in his epistle to the Galatians. Peter was visiting the church at Antioch and had conducted himself just as Paul and Barnabas did, without prejudice against the Gentile Christians. He entered freely into social contacts with them, ate with them, and fellowshiped with them without restraint.

But when a group of Jewish Christians arrived from Jerusalem and expressed alarm over Peter’s behavior, he backed away and stopped eating with the Gentiles. While social equality was taken for granted in Antioch, it was still not accepted by these Judaizers, and Peter was afraid of the trouble they might cause him back home in Jerusalem. Paul called it hypocrisy. And he was right. That is exactly what it was.

But the thing that hurt Paul most was that his dear friend Barnabas allowed himself to be affected by Peter’s hypocrisy.

Paul later wrote, “The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy” (Gal. 2:13).

Can you feel the emotion in those words, “even Barnabas”? Paul could not believe it. How could Barnabas do that? He knew better. He understood the doctrines of grace, Christian liberty, and the oneness of all true believers in Christ. He had been treating the Gentile believers in Antioch as equals for years. Now, for fear of what a few Judaizers might say about him in Jerusalem, he turned coward and left Paul standing alone. Could it have been Barnabas’s hurt over the change in leadership that made him turn his back on Paul so easily?

Barnabas surely recognized his mistake and repented.

The wound would heal, but the scar would remain, leaving a strain on their friendship. I wonder if deep in his soul Paul did not harbor a bit of mistrust for Barnabas. Maybe he thought he was a bit wishy-washy, a compromiser. His mention of it in his letter to the Galatians reveals that he never really forgot it. Did they ever talk it out, or did they just ignore it and hope everything would be okay (as we so often do).

A Great Disagreement

If the feelings were there, and Paul and Barnabas never owned up to them, honestly admitted them, or openly discussed them, surely the stage was set for a violent disagreement. And that is exactly what happened a very short time later. Chronologically, the next turn of events in their relationship occurred immediately after Barnabas’s hypocritical actions at Antioch.

“After some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.’ Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work” (Acts 15:36–38).

It was a simple procedural matter. It seems so inconsequential; we would think that they could have sat down together, discussed the pros and cons, and come to a mutually agreeable decision. For example, “Let’s not take him on this trip, but maybe on the next one.” Or, “Maybe we can take him, but we should lay down certain prerequisites ahead of time.” Or, “Let’s talk to him about his previous defection and the seriousness of it, find out what was behind it and how we can avoid it next time.” Certainly, some mutually agreeable solution could have been found.

But agreeable solutions are not usually found when unresolved feelings are already running deep. We have been hurt, and our hurt may have settled into a lingering, low-grade anger that we are probably not even willing to admit to ourselves. And now, even a minor disagreement becomes a major issue to us. We say to ourselves, “I’m not going to let him do that to me again. I’m going to take my stand right here, and I’m not backing down. If I let him take advantage of me this time, there’s no telling what he’ll try to do next.”

The Scripture says, “And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord” (Acts 15:39–40). The Greek word for “sharp disagreement” is the basis for the English word *paroxysm*, which means “a sudden violent emotion or action.” There is no way to whitewash this dispute. It was not just a mild difference of opinion. This was a serious argument. Emotions erupted. Sharp words were exchanged. Maybe unkind accusations were hurled. The word involves irritation and anger.

Solutions are not usually found when unresolved feelings are already running deep.

Three Reasons

This kind of contention occurs regularly among Christians—husbands and wives, parents and children, members of church congregations. Friendships have been broken, families torn apart, churches split. What are the reasons? One is *pride*. We may be sure that our opinions are right and others' opinions are wrong. If our opinions are rejected, we may think that somehow reflects on our worth as persons. So we fight with every weapon at our disposal to win the argument and protect our standing.

Another reason is *inadequate information*. We may be too quick to judge others. We form opinions on the basis of a few isolated experiences, or we believe somebody else's assessment of them and then jump to conclusions about them and their motives. Once our judgment is formed, we tend to view almost everything else they say or do in that light and use it to confirm our preconceived and prejudicial opinions. That can lead to repeated misunderstandings. We assume that because someone's motives were wrong in the past, they must be wrong now. We refuse to believe that people can grow and change.

But one of the most common reasons for contention among believers is our notorious *lack of communication*, especially failure to share our feelings. We find that it is easier to accuse, reprimand, or condemn others for what they have done, to

We need to admit to our feelings and talk about them.

argue over trivialities, or insist on our own way, than it is to admit honestly our feelings of hurt, insecurity, inferiority, anxiety, fear, selfishness, or jealousy. We do not want to look bad, so we cover up those feelings.

If we want to avoid angry arguments like this, there are some things we will need to do. The first is to learn to admit to our feelings and to talk about them. "I felt hurt when you did that. But I want things to be right between us. Can we talk about it?" "I felt

put down when you said that. Would you explain to me what you meant?” When we refuse to talk, and instead let the hard feelings seethe, the explosions are sure to come. Don’t put it off. Talk! Openly and honestly! Not about what the other person has done wrong, but about what you are feeling. There is no evidence that Paul and Barnabas did that.

Another thing we need to do is to allow for differences of opinion. God did not make us all from the same mold. We have different backgrounds and we think differently about things. If God can accept all of us with our differences, certainly we can learn to accept each other. On clear biblical issues, we cannot compromise. But most issues are not matters of right or wrong. We cannot say dogmatically that either Paul or Barnabas was right or wrong. The church seems to have put its official sanction on Paul (Acts 15:40), but that does not mean the church refused to approve Barnabas. It simply means that Paul was recognized as the leader now, even at Antioch. The rest of the story in Acts is about Paul, but that was only proper since he was the leading figure in the church. The Spirit of God does not tell us who was right or wrong.

None of us is perfect. We need to be willing to forgive.

Paul had a point. It is disheartening when someone on whom you are depending lets you down as Mark did. But Barnabas had a good point also. None of us is perfect; not Paul, not Peter, not Barnabas, not Mark, nor anybody else. Everybody deserves an opportunity to prove himself. The question is not, “Who is right or who is wrong?” But rather, “How can we work together in Christian love to do the job God has committed to us?” God wants us to learn the grace of forbearance for one another. Paul and Barnabas seem to have lost it.

One more thing—be quick to forgive. We are all human. We are going to let our old sin natures and psychological hang-ups get the best of us at times, and we are going to say the wrong

things in the wrong way. We need to be patient and understanding with each other and willing to forgive. We all do foolish things once in awhile. We want people to forgive us when we do, so we will need to extend the same courtesy to them. Paul and Barnabas failed on all of these counts.

A Good End

The most encouraging part of this story is the assurance that our sovereign God is in control of the whole situation.

Satan was at work, sin natures were flaring, but God is omnipotent. He could have changed the circumstances somehow to circumvent the conflict, but He permitted it, and He did what He always does for those who love Him: He worked it together to achieve good.

For one thing, it became a growing experience for the people involved, particularly for Paul. He was given to strong reactions (see Acts 23:3; also 17:16 where the verb form of the same word, “sharp disagreement,” is used). But God was working on this weakness in him. Some time later he wrote that love “is not easily provoked” (1 Corinthians 13:5, KJV, and again, he used the verb form of the same word). Maybe, when he wrote those words, he was reflecting back to this unhappy occasion. The argument helped him see his weakness and to claim God’s power to love.

God can find a way to use even our stupid and selfish blunders to glorify Himself.

Another beneficial thing God did through the conflict was to send out two missionary teams instead of one. While this was not the best way to accomplish that goal, maybe it would not have been achieved any other way. So while the argument

itself did not glorify God, the ultimate result did. God can do that for us, too. He can find a way to use even our stupid and selfish blunders to glorify Himself. That is no excuse for sinning, but

it certainly encourages us as we remember the blunders we have made.

One of the most obvious and important results of the disagreement was that a life was salvaged for God's usefulness. Only God knows what would have happened to Mark if Barnabas had not taken him under his spiritual supervision and nurtured him in his faith. Even Paul later admitted that Mark was profitable to him for ministry (2 Tim. 4:11). It is encouraging to know that God can use *our* mistakes, as well, to accomplish something beneficial in our lives or in the lives of others.

While there is no evidence that Paul and Barnabas ever resumed the kind of close relationship they once had, the bitterness was washed away and they came to respect one another deeply again. Paul later spoke kindly and admiringly of Barnabas (1 Cor. 9:6). I am confident that there has been a grand reunion in heaven.

But for ourselves, let's not wait until then. Let's learn to be open and honest with each other about our feelings right now, to talk more freely about them, to accept and love one another even when we differ, to avoid judging other people's motives, to tolerate one another's differing opinions, and to forgive one another quickly when old sin natures do hurtful things. Then marriages will be healed, friendships restored, feuding Christians reconciled, churches strengthened, and God glorified.