

God Sends Us Together Even When We are Not “Together.”

Acts 15:36-16:5

June 22, 2025

Prayer

One of the most beautiful things about humans is that we are all different. We have different tastes, preferences, perspectives, and choices. In fact, the beauty of our differences is one of the messages of the stained-glass window behind the cross. Though we are all different shapes, sizes and colors, the Holy Spirit brings us together in beautiful unity.

And ideally, that is the way it truly is. Yet that's not the way it always plays out. Sometimes our differences lead to disagreements and our response to those disagreements can either deepen the beauty...or stain it.

How do you respond when you find yourself disagreeing with another Christian?

For any number of reasons, some people withdraw. They go quiet and pull back, which leads to emotional or relational distance. Others get loud, to express their opinion, win people to their point of view and prove they are right, which also can lead to emotional or relational distance.

Many have adopted the current cultural practice of canceling the other person out of their life and the presence of social media has made this the expected way to engage in disagreements.

If you don't like what someone else says or does, just “unfriend” them. Block them from your online life. Withdraw your support and maybe even signal your virtue by publicly taking a stand against that person, that organization or that idea. And as we might guess, this also results in emotional and relational distance between people.

While highlighted in social media, boycotts and hashtag movements, canceling others out is practiced at a more individual level all the time. It happens when one person either passively or actively distances themselves from another because of disagreement or relational discomfort.

As followers of Jesus, members of His body and citizens of His kingdom, we are expected to handle our disagreements in another way. Yes, things can get heated and, yes, things may not always be handled in loving, honorable ways. But what happens after the fight? What is the end goal that the Lord wants us to pursue?

Today's passage contains a powerful disagreement between two friends, Barnabas and Paul. If we dig around here a bit I think we will find the beauty of how God redeemed this moment and how the Prince of Peace can work in every conflict between Christ-followers.

The story comes right after the Jerusalem Church decided that circumcision will not be required for Gentiles coming to faith in Christ.ⁱ Judas and Silas were chosen as delegates to communicate the complete decision to the church in Antioch. They did this, then returned to Jerusalem. Today's text begins in 15:36.

³⁶ After some time [two to three years] 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. Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed for Cyprus. ⁴⁰ Paul chose Silas,ⁱⁱ and as he left, the believers entrusted him to the Lord's gracious care. ⁴¹ Then he traveled throughout Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches there.

Paul went first to Derbe and then to Lystra, where there was a young disciple named Timothy. His mother was a Jewish believer, but his father was a Greek. ² Timothy was well thought of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium, ³ so Paul wanted him to join them on their journey. In deference to the Jews of the area, he arranged for Timothy to be circumcised before they left, for everyone knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ Then they went from town to town, instructing the believers to follow the decisions made by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in their faith and grew larger every day.

Paul and Barnabas disagreed and so they split up. How did this play out? Did they do what seems to us like the natural thing to do? Did they unfriend each other and publicly express why they were right and the other was wrong? To find the answer, we need to dig a little deeper. Let's begin by looking at the key players.

John Mark was a young man with connections in both the Hebrew and the Roman world. John was his Hebrew name. Mark was his Roman name. He and his mother, Mary, had a house large enough to host meetings of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:12). He was Barnabas' cousin (Col 4:10), a close associate of Peter (1 Peter 5:13) and is the author of the gospel that bears his name.

Barnabas was not always known by that name. His parents called him Joseph but Acts 4:36 says he was given the name Barnabas by the apostles. His new name means Son of Encouragement. And it's easy to see why.

When Saul was first converted to faith in Christ no one wanted to meet with him because they were all afraid and thought it was a trap. It was Barnabas who took the chance, met with Saul, and then introduced him to the apostles (Acts 9:27).

When Barnabas saw the amazing things God was doing at the church in Antioch, he was the one who traveled to Tarsus and recruited Saul to help him in that work of discipling these new believers 11:25.

And have you ever noticed this little detail? In Acts 13 Barnabas and Saul are sent off on their first missionary journey as Barnabas and Saul. But in Acts 15 we read how Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem for that council meeting. It started with Barnabas leading Saul and somewhere along the way, Barnabas willingly took second place so that Paul could become the leader.

No matter who he was with, Barnabas encouraged people to embrace the fullness of what God could have them become.

And then there was Paul. He was clear in what the gospel is and passionate to not let anything dilute or hinder the sharing of that good news. And this included being very picky about who was on the team.

Those are the players. Let's consider what happened on that first missionary journey.

The first missionary journey with Barnabas, Saul and John Mark started off great. They began on the island of Cypress. Since this was Barnabas' home turf they could more easily find help and support along the way. They covered the entire island and, in the end, they even saw the governor, a Gentile named Sergius Paulus, come to faith.

Compared to what was ahead, Cyprus was an easy journey. There was just one small bit of opposition that they powerfully overcame. But for some reason, the moment they arrived on the mainland, John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem.ⁱⁱⁱ We are not given the reason why.

Was the opposition on Cyprus too upsetting for the young man? Was the easy path of Gentiles into the faith, including the high-ranking Roman, a little hard for Mark to accept? Was it something else? We don't know the reason, but we do know that this early departure and the reason for it led Paul to conclude that John Mark must not join them for the second journey. Barnabas thought otherwise.

This was no small disagreement. The Greek word used is a forceful word that suggests Paul was really irked by Mark's choice to leave them. Paul knew the journey ahead would be very difficult and he knew that everyone on the team must be firmly convinced that salvation was found in Christ alone and not in Christ plus adherence to Jewish practices. Whatever the reason for Mark's departure, Paul was not willing to risk it again.

This detail of their argument speaks of the historicity of this story. This is not a fictional account that paints the main characters in good light. This is a true story that tells it like it was.

Paul and Barnabas were two human beings with real emotions and differing ideas. And they each felt strongly enough about their idea that they were willing to split up their championship team over it. I wonder, how did these friends who had shared so much together and shared a common bond in Christ respond to this disagreement?

A careful reading of the text suggests they did not fly off the handle. While there were likely some fireworks, raised voices and a heated exchange, mutual respect, friendship and a common commitment to the primary objective remained.

Their original plan was to return to the “brothers in *all the places* they preached the word of the Lord to see how they were doing.” This would require them to go to both the Island of Cyprus and to Cilicia, the mainland north of the island.

Barnabas took Mark to Cyprus. It was a familiar place, Barnabas’ home and the place where Mark already had experienced success. Paul bypassed Cyprus and went straight to Syria and Cilicia, which was his home turf and the place of greatest challenge and opposition.

I don’t think this was an accident. Even in the midst of their strong disagreement, they kept the primary objective in mind and mapped out their plan. They both went to the place where they could be most effective.

They were still being sent together, even though they weren’t “together” in person or in practice. They respected each other enough to trust each other to get the job done, even if they did it in a different way and with a different team.

Sharp disagreements happen. It is part of being human. Differences of opinion or calling or personality or the way one wants to get the job done are not a problem in the Lord’s eyes. It is how we handle them that makes the difference.

Other parts of the New Testament show that Paul and Barnabas remained as friends and kept in touch with each other over the years.^{iv} It is also clear that Paul and John Mark reconciled. Paul told the Colossians to welcome Mark if he visits. Later he told Timothy that Mark is helpful in ministry and asked Timothy to bring Mark with him when Timothy came to visit Paul. Does that mean that Timothy and Mark were living in the same town sharing in ministry together? It is an interesting thought to consider.

In God’s kingdom you can have a sharp disagreement that tears apart key leaders but ultimately results in the creation of two championship missionary teams and the development of the next generation of church leadership!^v I am not saying that the ends justify the means. I am not saying “Look at how God took this bad thing and made it good.”

I am saying look at how Paul and Barnabas handled their dispute. They didn’t cancel each other out. Knowing that Christ had broken down the dividing wall they chose not to build another one. Rather than focus on their differences, they focused on their oneness in Christ and their common call to serve Christ alone.

When our children were young, they were involved in basketball and soccer games. At some point in every game the same thing would happen. We'd watch two children on the same team fight over the ball. At which point the coach (and often their parents) would shout "Same team! Same team!"

Rather than work together to get the ball into the goal they fought each other to gain control of the ball. They lost sight of their objective. Anne and I picked up on that little gem of wisdom so that when we entered an energized discussion she or I could say, "Same team?"

Sometimes we need an outside voice to cut through the emotion and ask, "Do you want to win the argument or gain the objective?" Do you want to convince Barnabas that choosing Mark was a mistake or do you want to build the church and display God's kingdom to the world?

James 1:19-20. "Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. ²⁰ Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires."

The righteousness mentioned here has to do with engaging other people in right ways. It is living justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with your God...and human anger—along with the unfriending, cancel culture of our day—does not produce this kind of fruit.

Paul told the church in Rome, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (12:2). A renewed mind is empowered to recognize God's truth so that the Kingdom of God begins to have more influence on our lives than the kingdom of man.

The Corinthians were told that

¹⁵ [Jesus] died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them. ¹⁶ So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! ¹⁷ This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

And then there is the beautiful command given to us through the book of Colossians 3:12-17.

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Disagreements happen. It is what we do after the disagreement that makes the difference. And what we do is not from our sheer force of willpower. It is God's Spirit reminding us and empowering us to live out who we are in Christ.

No matter what the dispute might be, always remember who you are in Christ. Enter that moment confident that you are deeply loved by God. You are accepted in Christ, secure in Christ and significant in Christ and no one can change that. In other words, your personal wellbeing is not in danger here.

As you enter the dispute remembering God's love for you and your identity in Christ, remember also that you are talking with someone who is deeply loved by God and needs to be reminded of that love. This is someone you are called to love in Christ's name.

As Paul said,

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

In the kingdom of God we are changed people, with new allegiances, and new priorities. As a result, rather than canceling others out, we are empowered to model a new way as we move toward each other in love.

In his book, *The Prayer of the Lord*, R.C. Sproul writes:

John Calvin said it is the task of the church to make the invisible kingdom visible. We do that by living in such a way that we bear witness to the reality of the kingship of Christ in our jobs, our families, our schools, and even our checkbooks [relationships and disagreements] because God in Christ is King over every one of these spheres of life. The only way the kingdom of God is going to be manifest in this world before Christ comes is if we manifest it by the way we live as citizens of heaven and subjects of the King.

And so, like Paul and Barnabas, we willingly surrender to God so that His love, gentleness, mercy and patience might flow through us to the people in our lives.

As we've seen and as we know, relationships between Christians can be quite difficult and lead to a painful parting of ways. Even so, the dispute between Paul and Barnabas shows how conflict can play out redemptively in the Kingdom of God.

Disagreements happen. Thinking only of your Christian brothers and sisters, what disagreement, dispute or discomfort are you experiencing right now? Does a face or name come to mind? Has your response to that conflict led to greater relational distance or the opportunity for reconciliation and the advancement of God's kingdom?

What might your Lord be asking you to do today?

The bread before us symbolizes that we are one loaf, one body, one "people of His very own eager to do what is good." Christ has made us one and we can't change that, but we can live more fully into it.

The cup before us reminds us of the covenant Christ made with His blood. A covenant that brings us peace with God and provides for us an identity in Jesus that no one can remove from us. We can't change this, but we can live more fully into it.

As you eat the bread today think of any disagreements or distance you have with a brother or sister in Jesus. You are one loaf with that person. Christ died for you both and sent you both on a common mission. As you swallow the bread ask the Lord what He would like you to do.

As you receive the cup, think about the sacrifice that forgives your sin and gives you peace with the Father. Consider what you have received and who you are in Christ. Then, let that moment of swallowing be your "yes" to Jesus as King. Surrender yourself to His love and way again and ask Him to lead you in this life.

The Peace Prayer, attributed to St Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is discord, union;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may seek not so much
to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;

for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life. Amen.

ⁱ The three requirements they agreed upon were not necessary for salvation, but they were helpful for building unity in the newly developing congregations made up of both Gentiles and Jews.

ⁱⁱ Paul chose Silas. This is the same Silas who, with Judas Barsabbas, carried the Apostolic Letter of Decision from Jerusalem to Antioch. They were kindred spirits in this venture. Plus, it would be good for Paul to have a leading member of the Jerusalem church as his companion. Additionally, Phil 16:37-38 reveals that Silas was also a Roman citizen. If he ever needed to claim privileges, he could claim them for both he and his friend.

ⁱⁱⁱ We can only speculate on Mark's reasons for leaving. The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Vol 2, p. 1403) offers these two possibilities: "The reason often given is that Mark's youth and inexperience were no match for the rigors of the journey, but Paul's adamant refusal to take him along on a second journey (15:36–40) suggests a more serious problem. Quite possibly, Mark had reservations about the wisdom of evangelizing Gentiles (such as the Cypriot proconsul, 13:12) without requiring some attachment to Judaism, a problem of conscience over which the early Jewish church continuously agonized (note 11:1–3; 15:5; Gal 2:11–14). After the Jerusalem Council (c. ad 49) decreed that gentile Christians need not be circumcised (Acts 15:22–29), Mark may have reconsidered his previous action and decided to cast his lot with Paul. But at this point the apostle may well have doubted the clarity and firmness of the young man's convictions."

^{iv} 1 Cor 9:6; Co 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11; Philm 24

^v Timothy becomes Paul's most valuable coworker over the span of the next fifteen years. He works alongside Paul in the evangelization of Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea (Acts 17:14–15), Corinth (18:5; 2 Cor. 1:19), and Ephesus (Acts 19:22). During Paul's Ephesian ministry, Timothy serves as Paul's emissary to the Corinthian church for handling some of the problems that surface there (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10). In a similar way, he serves the Philippian church (Phil. 2:19) and the Thessalonian church (1 Thess. 3:2, 6). He is also named as a cowriter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1) as well as his letters to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1), the Colossians (Col. 1:1), and to Philemon (Philem. 1). Shortly before the end of his life, Paul writes Timothy two personal letters: One gives a variety of instructions for exercising leadership in the church at Ephesus (1 Tim.) and the other offers significant advice and encouragement to the young coworker as Paul awaits death in a Roman prison (2 Tim.). Paul's affection for him is summed up well in a remark he makes to the Philippian church: "As a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel" (Phil. 2:22). Arnold, C. E. (2002). [Acts](#) (C. E. Arnold, Ed.; Vol. 2B, pp. 148–149). Zondervan.

At the same time John Mark becomes a leader in the church, a likely partner in ministry with Timothy (2 Tim 4:11) and one who was "like a son" to the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 5:13).