



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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### *The Disagreement Between Paul and Barnabas*

Acts 15:36–41

**O**UR TOUGH TEXT THIS MONTH IS A SOMEWHAT troubling one for two reasons. First, it recounts an unfortunate disagreement between two men of God, and second, it is used by some teachers to criticize the Apostle Paul. Our text is Acts 15:36–41:

**And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do. And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches.**

What happened here? What brought about such a division? Is there a practical application in this? Let's examine this passage with a two-fold emphasis: the incident and its importance.

#### *The Incident*

The scene here is the beginning of Paul's second *church-planting* journey (which has always seemed to me to be a far better term than "missionary," which is somewhat ambiguous at best nowadays). While Barnabas

wanted to include his cousin John Mark in the team (Col. 4:10), Paul did not. Why? The answer is back in Acts 13:13, which recounts, "Now when Paul and his company loosed from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia: and John departing from them returned to Jerusalem." While John Mark was a member of the team during the first journey, he left the team.

"Departing" translates the Greek *apochōreō*, from the root *chōreō*, "to depart," and the prefix *apo*, "from." This word occurs only two other times in the New Testament, the most graphic being when Jesus says that the day is coming when He will say to false professors, "I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matt. 7:23). The idea in this word, then, is total abandonment.

So why did John Mark abandon the team? Several reasons have been offered. One commentator summarizes:

(1) Perhaps he was disillusioned with the change in leadership. After all, Barnabas, the original leader, was John Mark's cousin. (2) The new emphasis on Gentiles may have been too much of an adjustment for a Palestinian Jew like Mark. (3) Possibly he was afraid of the dangerous road over the Taurus Mountains to Antioch which Paul was determined to travel. (4) There is some evidence Paul became quite ill in Perga, possibly with malaria, as the city of Perga was subject to malarial infections. Furthermore, Paul preached to the people of Galatia "because of an illness" (Gal. 4:13). The missionary party may have gone inland to higher ground to avoid the ravages of malaria and Mark in discouragement over this may have returned home. (5) Some think Mark was home-

sick. His mother may have been a widow (Acts 12:12); perhaps Mark became lonesome for her and home.<sup>1</sup>

In the final analysis, however, we submit that the reason for John Mark's defection was (and is) irrelevant. He abandoned not only God's *work* but also God's *workers*. The word translated **departed** in verse 38 is not the same word used back in 13:13. The Greek here is the stronger *aphistēmi*, to withdraw, remove oneself, forsake, desert, retire, or cease from something. Of its sixteen other New Testament appearances, one of the most graphic is when Paul declares that in "the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils" (1 Tim. 4:1). Paul Later uses the same word to declare that believers are to "withdraw" themselves from all kinds of false teachers (6:5). There is no doubt, then, as to John's Mark's serious defection.

Paul, therefore, flatly refused to allow John Mark to return to the team. This offended Barnabas for the obvious reason that John Mark was his cousin. Can there be any doubt that this was the real issue as far as Barnabas was concerned? Was he looking at the situation objectively? Was he concerned for the ministry or simply his cousin's hurt feelings (or even wounded pride)?

We should also take careful note of the phrase **Barnabas determined to take with them John**, which in a sense is the key to the whole question. **Determined** is the Greek *bouleuō*, to resolve in council, to decree, take counsel, consult, determine, or deliberate with oneself or with one another in counsel. So, with whom did Barnabas take council? The answer lies in the fact that the verb is in the *aorist tense* and the *middle voice*. Please bear with me in this technical point because it is pivotal.

The aorist tense is used for simple, undefined action.<sup>2</sup> We can best understand the middle voice by contrasting it with active and passive voice. While the active pictures the subject of the verb doing the acting, and the passive pictures the subject being acted upon, the middle voice pictures *the subject acting in its own interest*, that is, it receives the benefit of the action. Putting it together, then, the "aorist middle represents non-continuous action by the subject as acting upon himself or concerning himself."<sup>3</sup>

To illustrate, the aorist middle is used in Ephesians 1:4—"According as [God the Father] hath chosen us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world"—declaring that God did the choosing independently in the past and did so *primarily* for His own interest, that is, "To the praise of the glory of his grace" (v. 6).

So, with whom did Barnabas take council? *Himself*. He **determined** the matter totally *in* himself and *for* himself. While the NIV, NASB, and ESV weakly render this "wanted," **determined** is better, as is "was determined" in the NKJV and "was minded" in the original ASV (1901). All three demonstrate Barnabas' self motivation. Jay Green's *Literal Translation* is also good with "purposed."<sup>4</sup>

Does this not graphically demonstrate that Barnabas was, to use a modern idiom, "way out of line"? He was acting in his own interest and for his own purpose. The language allows no other conclusion.

Some immediately argue that John Mark deserved a "second chance." Well, Paul didn't think so, and we need to be reminded that Paul was now in charge! He was the Apostle, and Barnabas should have submitted to that authority. Harry Ironside well explains Paul's view:

Paul considered the work of the Lord so serious he could not think of linking up again with a man who had shown so little sense of the importance of service for the Lord. It was no picnic! It was severe testing, hard work, and service for the glory of God. Paul did not wish to take anyone who was not divinely guided nor ready to endure hardship.<sup>5</sup>

Sadly, **the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other**. The word **contention** is the extremely strong Greek word *paroxusmos* (English *paroxysm*, a fit or outburst). The root *oxunō* means to sharpen, incite, or irritate, and the prefix *para* pictures movement toward a certain point. The idea then is to impel, incite, or rouse someone toward something. Used in a bad sense, *paroxusmos* speaks of sharp contention, or even an angry dispute (i.e., inciting to anger), as is evident here. Another instance of the word is in Acts 17:16, where Paul's "spirit was stirred [*paroxusmos*] in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry." He was incensed to see how truly and totally pagan the city was. From this it would seem that Barnabas was just mad at Paul for his "unreasonableness," while Paul was incensed at the idea of taking along a man who had quit.

We would also submit that a factor that seems to be overlooked by many commentators is that the church at Antioch was the sending church. There is no indication whatsoever that there was a single voice of disagreement in the church regarding Paul's decision. Neither do we see a single repercussion from this incident in Paul's ministry. If this was really "sin" on Paul's part, should we not read of a hindrance to his ministry and his eventual repentance? Recall that Paul himself condemned the disunity of Euodias and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2), as well as other instances of disunity (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:1-7; etc.). But there is no condemnation from anyone anywhere in our text. Why? *We submit that it is because this is not really a matter of unity at all, rather a matter of spiritual qualification for ministry.* (We'll return to this point in our second section.)

It puzzles me that in their quest to reconcile this situation, some commentators make odd statements. One such anomaly is, "In God's providence, not one team of missionaries but two teams leave from Antioch," but the same writer goes on to negate such an idea with his very next comment: "Even if we know nothing about the result of the work performed by Barnabas and Mark, we still see

God's marvelous care for the believers in Cyprus."<sup>6</sup> But wait! How can both be true? Is it probable that God would sovereignly decree a second great missionary team but never inspire the Scripture writer to report on the ministry of that team? Yes, the text says that Barnabas and John Mark went to **Cyprus**, but it says absolutely nothing about what was accomplished there, if anything. To say that "we still see God's marvelous care for the believers in Cyprus" is pure speculation; we know nothing of the sort. There is no record that they ever planted a church or even ministered effectively.

Further still, note that there is no direct evidence that Barnabas and John Mark actually continued in active ministry, at least for a time. Cyprus, in fact, was Barnabas' home (Acts 4:36), so is it not possible that the words **Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus** imply that they simply left the ministry for awhile, choosing to go home instead?

Even more significant, it is essential to note that at this point both John Mark and Barnabas vanish from the Acts narrative, their ministries never being mentioned again. We cannot help but be reminded of Demas (2 Tim. 4:10), who forsook the ministry and disappeared. Yes, John Mark appears again in 2 Timothy 4:11, where he and Luke are the only ones who are by Paul's side at the end, but this is an entirely different setting. It has nothing to do with preaching, planting churches, or any such ministry. He is mentioned twice more as Paul's co-worker (Col. 4:10; Phile. 24), but this says nothing of his ministry while apart from Paul.

Likewise, it seems Paul and Barnabas also later reconciled—Paul spoke of him in positive terms in 1 Corinthians 9:6—but once again, this is a different setting, with still no mention of ministry while divided from Paul.

In dramatic contrast to the ministry of Barnabas and John Mark (if there even was any), **Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God.** The word **recommended** renders the strong Greek word *paradidōmi*, which occurs some 120 times in the New Testament and is translated most often as "deliver" (or similar form), although at times as "give, gave, and betrayed." A study of this important word reveals much.

The root *didōmi* means "to give of one's own accord and with good will." The prefix *para* adds the idea of alongside or over to, providing the full meaning, "to deliver over to the power of someone." It was used in Classical Greek (before the New Testament) as a legal term for delivering a prisoner to the court. Likewise, the basic New Testament meaning is to deliver someone over to judgment and death. In Matthew 4:12, it's used of John the Baptist when he was "cast into prison" with the ultimate end of death.

With that in mind, it's noteworthy that most occurrences of *paradidōmi* refer to the Lord Jesus being deliv-

ered over for certain death. This was the whole reason He came to earth in His first advent. He did not come to live or even to "judge the world" (John 12:47); He came to die that sinners would be saved. We see this in every stage of his final days on earth: He was "betrayed" into the hands of men (Matt. 17:22), "betrayed" to the High Priest (20:18), "delivered" to the Gentiles (20:19), "delivered" to Pilate (27:2), "delivered" to the death sentence (Luke 24:20), and "betrayed" for crucifixion (Matt. 26:2).

It's also significant that *paradidōmi* is used of the Christian's response to what Christ did for them. Acts 15:25–26 describes Paul, Barnabas, and other "chosen men . . . that have hazarded [*paradidōmi*] their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Can each of us say this of ourselves? Are we willing to "hand ourselves over" to whatever might come in the cause of Christ?

There is one other important meaning of *paradidōmi*. It's also used in the sense of "to hand down, pass on instruction from teacher to pupil"<sup>7</sup> This meaning is vivid in Jude 3, where Jude writes that every believer "should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." As "the faith" is the preaching and teaching of the apostles that was handed down and passed on, it is that *faith*, that body of truth which comprises historical, evangelical Christianity and is the faith we are to continue to hand down.

With that in mind, Luke used this strong word to demonstrate that the church **recommended**, that is, delivered up and handed over Paul and Silas for the ministry at hand. There is no word of rebuke towards them, only blessing. In contrast, no such word is used of Barnabas and John Mark because they had left the team and gone their own way.

I'm convinced that the weight of evidence overwhelmingly indicates that it was Barnabas and John Mark who were at fault in this incident, not Paul. Motivated out of sentimentality and misplaced family loyalty, Barnabas wanted to include a man in a difficult and demanding ministry who had once quit and thereby (at least temporarily) disqualified himself from ministry, and Paul would have not of it. That leads us to our second emphasis.

### *The Importance*

Why is this incident important? We submit two reasons.

*First*, as mentioned above, the primary issue in this passage seems to be that of *spiritual qualification for ministry*. The common attitude of our day is that anyone can do anything he (or she) wants, regardless of God's calling, qualification, or examination, as noted in an earlier issue of TOTT (#18, January/2007, "Is There a So-Called 'Call' to Ministry?").

As noted in that previous article, 1 Timothy 3:1 is pivotal: "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work." To summarize, "desire" is *oregō*, "to stretch

one's self out in order to grasp something; to reach after or desire something."<sup>8</sup> It speaks of a deep longing, a complete disregard for all else. "Desireth," then, is *epithumeō*, "to long after, to have a passionate compulsion for something," in this context something "good." While *oregō* implies only the outward, *epithumeō* refers to the inward feeling of desire. Taken together, the two terms describe the man who pursues the ministry outwardly at all cost because of a driving compulsion inwardly.

John Mark, therefore, is a classic example of one who did not pursue the ministry in disregard of everything else. Something, whatever it was, turned him aside from the task at hand, thereby disqualifying him. While he returned later, and we rejoice in that, in this incident he was wrong and Paul was absolutely right in excluding him.

This incident further exposes another trend in our own day, namely, restoring men to the pastoral office no matter what the offense. To illustrate, commenting on the critical meaning and implications of a man being "blameless" (*anepileptos* in 1 Tim. 3:2, "nothing which an adversary could seize upon to base a charge," and *anengklētos* in Titus 1:6, "not be called in," above reproach) one writer puts it far better than I could:

One contemporary trend that is cause for great concern is the shocking moral sins pastors commit only to step back into ministry as soon as the publicity cools down. . . . The Bible clearly teaches that once a man fails in the area of sexual immorality, he is unqualified for pastoral ministry any longer. Certainly we want him restored to the Lord and to the fellowship, but biblical qualifications for one who preaches God's Word and is identified as pastor, overseer, or elder exclude him from that role in a church that is pleasing God. . . . This world overflows with sexual sin, and Paul directs the church to find as leaders men who have impeccable reputations . . . . This is the kind of man God is looking for to set up as the model in His church. . . . Sexual sin disqualifies any man from being a pastor. The Apostle Paul remained keenly aware of that fact, saying, "I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27, [NASB])." That is strong terminology. Paul maintained rigorous self-discipline to avoid being disqualified from pastoral ministry. He knew that any kind of sexual sin brings lifelong reproach.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, sexual sin was not the issue with John Mark, but the point here is *qualification*. Men do not just "jump in and out" of ministry as they feel like it. They

cannot do whatever they want and remain in a place of leadership. The qualifications for leadership are high, irrevocable, and non-negotiable.

A corollary to this is the modern trend of "missionary trips," often involving a group of young people, an idea nowhere supported in Scripture. While sincere, such excursions are often little more than "school projects" at best, or vacations at worst, that demand very little in sacrifice and labor and certainly do not underscore the true hardships and *total dedication* of biblical ministry.

*Second*, we should also note the church's place in all this. Another modern trend is that people are either self-appointed to ministry or are appointed by any one of a thousand entities outside the local church (commonly called parachurch organizations). But it is beyond doubt that these practices are unsupported in Scripture. *The local church is to ordain and send out men for ministry*. In this incident, the church at Antioch blessed the ministry of Paul and Silas, but not that of Barnabas and John Mark.

So, as Paul (and by implication the church) recognized disqualified servants, we do well to recognize them today.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (ed.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Cook Communications Ministries), electronic edition.
- <sup>2</sup> Only in the indicative mood does the aorist denote punctiliar action (action that happens at a specific point in time) in the past. With few exceptions, when the aorist is used in any other mood, it refers only to the reality of the action, not when it occurred.
- <sup>3</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1991), p. 863.
- <sup>4</sup> A note for the technical reader. While our discussion refers to the Textus Receptus' and Majority Text's *ebouleusato* (aorist tense), the Critical Text has *ebouletō*, which is the imperfect tense, indicating continuous action and Barnabas' persistence (e.g. Wuest's *Expanded Translation* renders: "Barnabas, after thinking the matter over, kept on insisting that they take along with them also John"). Both are middle voice, however, so the point is basically the same.
- <sup>5</sup> Harry Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1943, 1977), p. 361.
- <sup>6</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *Baker's New Testament Commentary: Acts* (Baker Books, 1990), p. 570.
- <sup>7</sup> Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1975), Vol. 3, pp. 772-773.
- <sup>8</sup> Joseph Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon* (Hendrickson), p. 452.
- <sup>9</sup> John MacArthur, *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry* (W Publishing Group, 1995), pp. 89-91.

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