

A Tale Of Two Disputes

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Paul disputed often as a preacher of the gospel. Sometimes with unbelieving Jews. Sometimes with pagan Gentiles. Sometimes with his own brethren. (Read Acts 15-18). So, disputing with one's own brethren is no modern phenomenon.

Acts 15 tells of Paul's two better known disputes with his own brethren. The first part of the chapter tells of the circumcision and law of Moses issue. The latter part of the "John Mark" issue. Both disputes became very sharp.

The circumcision and law issue caused "no small dissension and dispute" at Antioch. (v. 2). It caused "much dispute" at Jerusalem. (v.7) "Leading men among the brethren" (v. 22) were involved. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas were among the speakers. They did not reach a mere concensus of the brethren. The Holy Spirit revealed it to those inspired men.

When they saw what "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us" (v. 28), they wrote to the brethren in Antioch, Syria, and Celicia. Brethren everywhere needed to know what the Holy Spirit taught on circumcision and the keeping of the law of Moses in the Christian age. (vv. 1, 20). This issue concerned the faith and prac-

tice of brethren everywhere. Acts and Paul's epistles show that Paul spoke and wrote much on this issue. He even pressed it. He "did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you." (Gal. 2:5). Brethren needed to know the truth and take a strong stand.

The "John Mark" issue came right on the heels the Jerusalem dispute. Paul and Barnabas had stood side by side at Jerusalem. Barnabas who was "a good man". He had contributed much to the growth of the church. (Acts 11:24). He vouched for Paul's discipleship at Jerusalem (Act 9:27), and later accompanied him on his first preaching tour among the Gentiles. (Acts 13). Now these two influential brethren locked horns.

"Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them in the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another." (vv. 37-39).

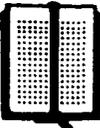
Talk about a powder keg! It is a thousand wonders the Lord's cause among the Gentiles did not permanently di-

vide. This incident could have devastated those young congregations. The two men who had meant the most to them are at odds.

One can imagine embarrassing questions that would be asked both men on their tours. Paul, how is Barnabas? Why did he not come this trip? What ever happened to his cousin, Mark? Barnabas, how is Paul these days? Was he not able to make the trip this time?

This dispute could provoke all kinds of questions for brethren to debate. It would be easy to view each question as a matter of principle. Could it go that far without someone being wrong? Who was at fault? Shouldn't all find out who is wrong and stand against him? If both were wrong, should others not refuse to receive and work with either one? If no principle was involved, didn't someone do wrong by not yielding before it reached the point that it did? (cf. Jas. 3:17 NKJV). Did John Mark do right or wrong in leaving the work on the first tour? If right, then did Paul do right in refusing to take him on this tour? If wrong, should he not be marked as an unfaithful quitter? And should not the churches they

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EXCUSES

Dee Bowman

People are basically the same. Most of us are actually rather transparent. As a gospel preacher, I hear the same excuses over and over again. And most excuses, in the final analysis, mean about the same thing. I'd like to visit with you about a few of them. Perhaps when you see them in print, you'll be less likely to make them in the future.

"We're Looking Around" What that generally means is that they didn't get invited to some party, or the preacher didn't notice they weren't there one Sunday, or the fact that they had been ill was not announced. I have seldom seen this excuse given when the elders of the congregation was consulted **first**, it's always when the people miss a few weeks and the elders begin to check on them to see what's wrong. Further, "we're looking around" very often means "we don't want to attend as regularly as you think we ought."

"We're Just Not Happy Here Anymore" That usually means that they are bored with the way things are going. There is not enough excitement to appeal to their emotional needs. Sometimes it means something has captured their fancy and "church" is getting in the way. Actually, when that excuse is made it's usually by those who are not at all active in the work of the church, nor are they busily engaged in really trying to live the Christian life on an everyday basis. They are the kind of folks who have to be coddled, appealed to in a special way. Such folks are usually spiritual adolescents, and have never grown any since they obeyed the gospel. Before you offer this excuse you should ask yourself one question: "What have I done to be happy here?"

"There's Not Anything For Our Kids To Do Here" What is the purpose of the church anyway? Is the purpose of the church to raise your kids? By what authority? The church provides spiritual nourishment for people of all ages. It has periodic special programs designed to promote spiritual growth and development. What more could you want from the local church? Furthermore, let me ask another question. What have you done, per-

sonally, for the kids here?

"We Visit Around A Lot On Sundays" What that is is an excuse for not being involved, and people who make it are usually just looking for some way to get lost in the crowd. They think they can be members at large, I suppose. Can we not understand that our influence for good is most useful in the church where we are members? It's fine to visit occasionally. I like that, too. But to visit around just so that you won't have to be involved is certainly not in our best spiritual interests, nor is it in the best interests of those you visit, if in fact you do go.

"The Services Here Just Aren't Inspiring" You know, you get out of a thing just about what you put into it. I believe a man can worship God when the singing is not the best, when the prayer is led by someone who stutters and stammers through it, and when the preaching is done by just a fellow who loves God and is not afraid to speak up for Him, if he has his heart in it. Sure, it may be a bit more difficult, but it certainly can be done. And if you will do your part, it may serve to improve an otherwise uninspiring service. Oh, it would be fine if every service could be conducted in the most reverential and emotionally uplifting manner, but one thing is sure - you can do your part; and if worship is not finally for the individual, I fail to see its profit.

"People Here Just Aren't Friendly Anymore" Who's not? Watch it, now, who's not? Are you doing your part to make sure that friendliness is a part of the fellowship? Do you make it a point to speak to everyone you can? If not, you can't really make that excuse, can you? To have friendliness, you must be friendly. What a flimsy "reason" for not attending!

Now don't get me wrong, I believe we ought to do the best we can in all areas of the work and worship of the church. But it all begins and ends with you. Furthermore, you need to make sure that you have a reason for what you are saying, not just an excuse. What's your real motive? Do you have the courage to face yourself and see? Remember, an excuse, given ostensibly to explain the facts, in reality distorts them. And if an excuse is not a reason, what is it?



problem between them. Why can we not leave it for them to work out, treat "both sides" as brethren and get on with the Lord's work? If we are party to such a dispute, why can we not have the good judgment to understand that brethren elsewhere honestly may not see things as clearly we think we do? Why try to draw the whole brotherhood into what is essentially a personal and/or local dispute (even though we may feel that some real principles are involved) and demand that they be involved whether they care to or not?

If brethren dispute over what does the Bible teach about a certain kind of conduct, one should have little trouble deciding who is right or wrong? The Bible contains all the facts on the subject. There is no excuse for not studying the issue, taking a strong stand and applying it to such conduct wherever he finds it.

There is a difference in deciding if a certain kind of conduct is wrong and deciding if a particular case of conduct by others is wrong. One has divine testimony to guide him in the first. In the second, if he was not immediately involved, he must depend on the testimony of mere men. Their testimony may conflict. He was not there. He saw nor heard none of the action in

question. He has no direct knowledge of the matter. What happened? It depends on who he asks. The matter is not as simple as deciding what the Bible teaches on the subject. After hearing all sides, it may be possible to be reasonably sure of what happened. If neither side is convincing, one may have to look at other independent evidence. Yet, with all the evidence he can get he may never know what happened - even if each side does feel that it has an "air tight" case. Though he should not be too hard on either side for acting in a way that they believe they must, since he honestly cannot decide where to put the blame, he ought not allow himself to be pressured into a judgment that he is in no position to make. Besides, it is not a good idea to take a dog by the ears. (Read Prov. 26:17).

To further confuse matters, we may get different assessments from honorable men closer to the situation. This is not parallel to excusing ourselves for not taking a stand on what the Bible teaches because "great and honorable men differ on the subject". We have "the faith once for all delivered unto the saints". We can read it for ourselves. We have all Scriptures that "great and honorable" men have. It is different with things that happen

between brethren. We rarely have all the information bearing on the case. There may be good brethren who, though not parties to the dispute, are in a position to know much more about it than we do. Yet, their assessments may vary greatly. Or they may not be able to decide at all, even knowing what they know.

So, brethren, let us be awfully careful about causing a great stir over the kind of disputes between other brethren. Especially if, from all appearance (at least in other matters), the disputants are going on in Lord's work in the Lord's way.

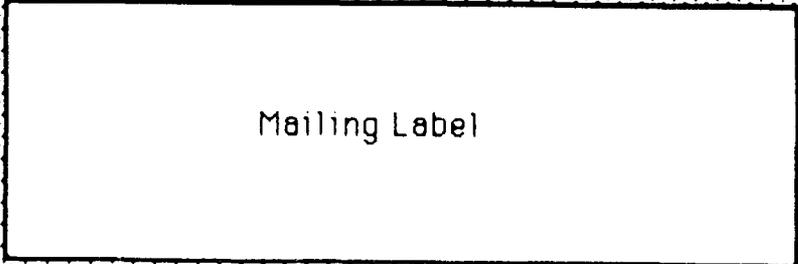
If are in such a dispute, we need to be mature enough to understand and charitable enough to accept that other brethren may not have the same perspective as we do. Why must we go on a kind of holy crusade to have our point of view accepted by the whole brotherhood? Why must we make their acceptance of our perspective a condition of friendship, support and fellowship?

If, because of what has happened between us and some brethren we feel that we cannot work closely them, then maybe we should not. But let's not be so free with our criticism of third parties who feel that they can.

Yes, we can learn a lot from how Paul and Barnabas behaved in both the disputes.

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Edited By:

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

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were about to visit be warned about Mark and Barnabas? If no vital principle was involved, should not either or both men be viewed as divisive for not yielding for the sake of peace? The Scriptures say nothing about such questions being asked about this case.

In my judgment, this problem did so little damage because Paul and Barnabas had the good sense to recognize and contain the scope of the issue. It was a dispute **between them**. Luke records much of what Paul said on his tour. He is not quoted once on this issue. One finds no letter from Paul or Barnabas to the churches the other visited explaining what really happened. None of Paul's epistles hint of this dispute. He later favorably and affectionately mentions Barnabas and Mark. Their differences were apparently resolved or put aside. Even though Luke candidly reports the matter, he makes no attempt to point a finger of blame. I kind of have an idea that if Paul, Silas, Barnabas, and Mark had shown up at a service over at Derbe, and the brethren had asked Barnabas to preach and Silas to lead prayer that Paul and Mark would have stayed for the service -- even putting in an "amen" every once in a while.

Maybe we can learn from all of this. There are general issues that arise among brethren - disputes over what does the Bible teach about various subjects. If it is a question of what does the **Bible teach** on any subject, we have all the facts at our finger-tips in the perfect law of liberty. Any situations that are discussed are hypothetical.

Then there are actual incidents where there is little dispute about what was said or done. There is general agreement by all sides on that. The dispute is over whether such a thing is right or wrong, scriptural or unscriptural, and what is the Scriptural way to deal with it? One should study such matters and take a stand on what the Bible teaches. What happened is not in question.

Then there are problems between brethren (even groups of brethren) that over who said what? To whom? When? Where? How? More often than not, both parties agree on what would be sinful in such cases - if this were one of those cases. Aw, but there is the rub. What really happened? In most cases, it is near impossible for brethren not on the scene to get a clear picture. In nearly every case, each party to the dispute thinks that his case is so strong that all ought see what is right. It is awfully hard for him not to feel hurt toward those who do not support his position.

Maybe we ought to grow up a little. Remember, one cause of strife is spiritual immaturity (1 Cor. 3:1-3). Suppose a sharp dispute arises between brethren over something that happened between them. They, like Paul and Barnabas, feel that they cannot work together. They go their separate ways preaching the gospel, worshipping in spirit and truth and working according the New Testament pattern. This appears to be the only

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