

PAUL

A MAN OF GRACE AND GRIT

STUDY TWELVE

The Day Two Missionaries Duked It Out

Acts 15:36–41

When we see Paul and Barnabas in the last few verses of Acts 15, they are in such a heated argument that it might seem they could never come to terms with it and they separated.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

DISAGREEMENTS are inevitable. Reconciliation is not.

None of us venture far into significant relationships without some sort of conflict. When that happens, our consciences tell us the right thing—extend charity, kindness, and forgiveness for the sake of unity and peace. Sounds simple, right?

Would you loan money to a friend who hasn't reimbursed you for his last loan? Would you loan your car to a friend who had wrecked it the last time she drove it? Would you loan your home to a friend who had a party and trashed it when he stayed there alone a few months ago? Suddenly, the situation changes. What if he or she causes the same problem?

Here's the issue: *Should someone who was irresponsible be given a second chance?* How we answer reveals our point of view. Do we look at the *person* or at the *principle*? Which is more important? Which is wiser? Which is more loving? The answer isn't so simple.

Paul and Barnabas were good men. They were godly men. They were missionaries—and friends. However, they were not perfect men. They had served so capably and compatibly on their first missionary journey. Yet, such smooth sailing is not guaranteed. This *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study takes a look at their painful difference, disagreement, and eventual disbanding.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Prepare to study God’s Word today by talking with Jesus. Invite His presence during your time in His Word. Let the following prayer guide your conversation.

Our Lord, I confess that my life is too often strewn with the wreckage of conflict and broken relationships. It’s so easy, so natural, so human, to see and judge others from my own perspective, while failing to seek to understand. Thank You for so lovingly stooping into our world and overcoming a chasm of relational conflict and brokenness between You and me—due to my sin. Help me deeply internalize that truth and give me the courage to humble myself, seek to understand others, and seek to be a reconciler. Thank You, Jesus, for being with me. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Their first missionary journey came to an end. Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch of Syria. “And they stayed there with the believers for a long time” (Acts 14:28).

While in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas glowingly reported on God’s powerful work and inroad of grace to the gentiles (14:27). But then, Jewish Christians from Judea arrived and insisted that the gentile Christians must be circumcised to be saved (15:1). Paul and Barnabas vehemently disagreed with the men. This was a serious matter, so the church sent Paul and Barnabas as “delegates to Jerusalem” to discuss the issue with the apostles at a meeting called the Jerusalem Council—a pivotal event in church history. Read [Acts 15:1–35](#) and then read the [article](#) about this council in the free, online *Holman Bible Dictionary* at studylight.org. Record key insights you discover.

Paul and Barnabas were pillars of the church, ministering side-by-side in a solid partnership. Then Paul, who was likely prompted by the Holy Spirit, floated an idea to Barnabas. That’s when cracks began to form.

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Observation: A Wholesome Suggestion Sparks a Blowout

Use your observation skills below to explore how Paul's wholesome suggestion sparked a relational rift.¹ In [Acts 15:36–37](#), what did Paul recommend and what was his intended mission? What was Barnabas' response?

Paul replied in [15:38](#). Compare the verse in the NLT and in the NASB. What was his rationale?

According to [15:39](#), how would you characterize the “temperature in the room”?

In [15:39–41](#), how did Paul and Barnabas resolve their dispute? Look up the destinations they traveled to by using a Bible map, like “[Paul's Missionary Journeys](#)” at [insight.org](#). What does their route tell you about their decision and the purpose for their mission?

The idea wasn't the problem. Both of them wanted to go. It's what followed the idea that created the rift. They showed themselves, warts and all.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Interpretation: One Issue . . . Two Viewpoints

The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:39 is described as “sharp.” The Greek word is *paroxysmos*, which is defined in the online *Mounce’s Greek Dictionary* at billmounce.com. What does your research inform you about the magnitude of their disagreement? Write your own paraphrase of this verse.

In every disagreement, there are the same ingredients. First: an issue. The issue is objective, and it involves principles. There is an issue at stake, it’s clearly stated, and there are principles that surround it. Second: various viewpoints. The viewpoints are subjective, and they involve personalities. In many disagreements, each side has validity. Both sides have strengths. In heated disagreements, someone usually gets hurt. And, the higher the heat, the deeper the hurt. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Let’s consider each person’s side of the argument.

Barnabas

What does [Colossians 4:10](#) tell us about the relationship between Barnabas and John Mark? How is this connection helpful for our understanding of Barnabas’ argument?

Barnabas, whose name means “son of encouragement,” was naturally inclined to come alongside in support of others. How did his personality shape his viewpoint?

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Scripture brings further clarity. According to *Psalm 40:1–3*, what did David, and later Barnabas, understand about God’s character?

What does *103:11–12* add?

How does *Lamentations 3:22–23* fit within Barnabas’ perspective?

Paul

Paul—formerly a Hebrew of Hebrews, consummate Pharisee, educated under the gifted Gamaliel, now a man dramatically converted on the Damascus Road and deeply steeped in Christian theology direct from the Holy Spirit—possessed a very different viewpoint about John Mark. How might Paul pose a strong argument for his attitude toward John Mark, according to *Proverbs 25:19*?

Matthew 10:38 and *Luke 14:27* echo the theme. How might the teaching of these verses fit within Paul’s perspective?

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Shortly after John Mark's desertion, Paul uttered in [Acts 14:22](#) what had been his attitude all along. What must others have understood about Paul? How does this verse help us make sense of Paul's response to John Mark?

Barnabas is looking at the man; Paul is looking at the principle. Barnabas is looking ahead; Paul is looking back. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Multiplication by Division

Paul and Barnabas, unable to find compromise in their dispute, went their separate ways. While Barnabas is mentioned only a few other times in the New Testament outside of Acts, it's very likely he continued to serve the Lord. Paul continued his missionary journeys with a new team and, of course, authored 13 of the 27 documents in the New Testament. Despite their difference, we read of no lingering bitterness between the two.

Not all separations lead to bad conclusions. Every time we read Mark's gospel, we taste the fruit of Barnabas' ministry in the life of the young man who became a biographer of Jesus and who eventually won Paul's respect and admiration. "Make Mark welcome," Paul told the Colossian believers. Paul considered him one of his "co-workers" in Philemon 1:24 and "helpful" in his ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).

Some of the finest churches, seminaries, or businesses have emerged better than before because of a split. In God's sovereignty and goodness, He can multiply His ministry by sending His servants in different directions. By dividing yet continuing to serve the Lord, how did these men model the spirit of [Philippians 2:3–4](#)?

How did their separation reinforce the truth of [1 Corinthians 12:14–18](#) and [Ephesians 4:16](#)?

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We come a long way in life when we realize that there may be another idea outside the one we thought of—and it goes even further than our own—that God may be pleased to bless. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Seeing Viewpoints and Seeking Compromise

Take a look at these four application principles that emerge from our study about conflict in ministry.

1. *When engaged in a disagreement, work hard at seeing the other point of view.* Required qualities include: listening, honesty, objectivity, and humility.
2. *When both sides have good support, seek a wise compromise.* Compromise isn't always a weakness.
3. *When the conflict persists, care enough to work it through rather than walk away.* Conflict may urge us toward either “fight” or “flight.” But slamming objects, silent treatments, and quitting on relationships are never appropriate responses.
4. *When the conflict cannot be resolved, graciously agree to disagree without becoming disagreeable.* In the absence of resolution, commit to suspending further discussion and judgment.

In the throes of their conflict, do you naturally find yourself identifying with Paul or Barnabas? Why?

Reflect on a conflict you are or have been involved in. What was the issue? What were the viewpoints? How was the conflict resolved? Or how would you like to help resolve it?

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What insights or life principles on conflict have you drawn from this Bible study? How can you use the four principles stated above to help you work through a conflict?

A wise person once said, “In essentials . . . unity. In non-essentials . . . liberty. In all things . . . charity.” What a way to live. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for the beautiful way You mend and heal and bring about release and reconciliation. Thank You for the relief that comes through forgiveness. Broaden our shoulders and deepen our wisdom and break our wills as we humble ourselves to do what must be done. May we do it graciously and willingly, as You give the strength that’s needed. It’s not just about Paul and Barnabas, but it’s about us. I trust You, Father, to do it deeply and permanently, that the wound might heal and that a full life might follow. I ask it through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, “*How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?*”

For the 2025 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll’s messages. Copyright © 2001, 2025 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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