

AGREEING TO DISAGREE
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Text: Acts 15: 36 – 41

Introduction: Career as a professor of religion at two Baptist academic institutions; service as a trustee at both the state and national level on Baptist historical organizations, including time as chairman at both levels; and I have served as executive director of the SBC Historical Commission and the Southern Baptist Historical Society, which is now called the Baptist History and Heritage Society– most of these years were set in the context of controversy in the SBC (1979-2000)

In fact, almost my entire career was set in a background of controversy – began in 1979 at the SBC meeting in Houston– actually started earlier in the mid-1970s – in many ways it resulted in irreparable harm to the SBC, although many would call it a victory.

Today, I would like to focus upon the issue of conflict and the resulting diversity, and propose that when properly understood, conflict and diversity can result in much good.

I. My personal journey is simply a reflection of the history of conflict and controversy of the people called Baptists, which has resulted in a wide range of diversity for the movement. From our beginnings we Baptists have had “meaningful dialogue” over a variety of issues. A friend of mine, Walter “Buddy” Shurden, now a retired professor of Baptist history at Mercer University, in 1972 published a marvelous little book entitled “Not A Silent People.” He updated the book not too many years ago, documenting once again that a major characteristic of Baptists is our *tendency to battle with each other*.

A. **Origins:** Among the issues over which we have engaged in debate was the question of our origins. In the mid-19th century many Baptists, in an effort to prove that we were the one true denomination argued that we began with the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Others more historically inclined traced our roots either to the Anabaptists who arose during the reformation in the 16th century, or the English Separatists who began baptizing believers in late 1608 or early 1609 (400 years ago) while exiles from religious persecution in Amsterdam. People were fired, including William H. Whitsitt, president of Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY.

B. **Missions and anti-missions:** Baptists battled over whether or not to take the Gospel to the “heathen.” The Hyper-Calvinism of the 18th century, which taught that God had elected or predestined some to be saved and not others resulted in many saying that we would take away from God’s glory by inviting the lost to have faith in Christ. Fortunately, English Baptists led by William Carey and Andrew Fuller won out and the modern missions movement began with the organization of the Baptist Missionary Society on October 2, 1792.

In the 19th century in the United States, Baptists engaged in what is called the “anti-missions” controversy, again with the focus being upon a Calvinistic approach to salvation, and an anti-board approach along with an anti-Sunday School approach.

C. **Slavery:** Most of us are aware of the battle over slavery in our country. The Baptists of the North and the South divided sixteen years before the Civil War began, when the Southern Baptist Convention was organized in 1845.

D. **Landmarkism, theology, science and faith:** Baptists have argued over the validity of other denominations, certainly over theology from our very beginnings, and over science and faith, especially over the interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis.

E. **Segregation and integration:** We have had conflict over segregation and integration (1960s, no MLK, Jr. without controversy), over the role of women in the ministerial leadership within the church, and over a strange combination of religion and politics in the late 20th century. Add the Bible, church and state, even Disneyland!

F. **Music in Worship:** We have even battled over music in worship! How many of you in recent weeks engaged in "carnal formalities"? How about "promiscuous singing?" In the 17th century, "carnal formalities" referred to congregational hymn singing, and there was a tremendous debate over whether or not this was permissible. "Promiscuous singing" was a battle over whether or not men and women could sing together. We have fought over the role of choruses in worship, and the use of musical instruments other than pianos and organs.

F. One might conclude that controversy and conflict is totally destructive in its effect. But that may not be the case, at least in my mind. Conflict enables us to respond to the burning issues of our day, it provokes us into understanding not only of our positions but those with whom we disagree, and it often results in a more clearly defined purpose and mission, along with the emphasis upon creating new tools to effectively minister and serve. And it often leads to diversity in terms of theology, ministry and missions, and worship.

I might add that conflict and diversity is not new, of which you are surely aware, and that **we need only go back to the Scriptures to find an excellent example of how conflict may result in good.**

II. **Conflict or disagreement between Paul and Barnabas** – two of the most respected figures in the NT

A. **Barnabas** – Joseph (nickname – “Son of Encouragement”) – sells land to aid the poor in Jerusalem, gives proceeds to the apostles, and sets a lasting example of sharing and compassion.

B. **Saul or Paul** – total commitment, never did anything half-way – dedicated, intellectual rabbi who was taught by the famous teacher Gamaliel – present at stoning of Stephen - inquisitor against Christians – Jerusalem – Damascus.

C. Barnabas vouches for Saul / Barnabas takes Saul with him to Jerusalem with offering for those affected by famine / Barnabas later invites Saul to assist him in the church of Antioch of Syria, where Jews and Gentiles worshipped equally.

D. **First Missionary journey** – Barnabas and Saul sent out by the progressive church at Antioch of Syria (Jews and Gentiles worshipped together) - take along **John Mark** – change in name and leadership as they depart from the island of Cyprus to the area known as Asia Minor – Mark decides for whatever reason to return home to Jerusalem – In Asia Minor churches were established and/or converts made in Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe – after retracing their steps, the missionaries returned to Antioch of Syria and reported on their work – then they traveled to **Jerusalem** where a major council of the church decided that Gentile converts were not under the Jewish law but under Jesus alone through faith (Luke reverses the order of the missionaries and lists Barnabas first in this section of Acts).

E. **Second Missionary journey** – conflict – division of labor – what were the results?

1. **Paul takes the Gospel to Europe** – takes with him Silas, picks up **Timothy** at Lystra, crosses to Troas, has the Macedonia vision, and crosses into Europe and makes his way to Philippi – he establishes churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Borea. He then travels to Athens and Corinth before retracing his steps on his return to Antioch. **Paul writes many *letters to the churches and friends* that he made along the way on his journeys, and his testimony is found in the numerous writings that are included in the *NT canon*. Two letters credited to Paul in the Pastoral Epistles are addressed to Timothy, a younger minister.**

2. **Luke** participates in the second and third journeys; writes the third ***Gospel and the Book of Acts***; represents the Gentiles with his writings

3. **John Mark** – He had participated with **Paul and Barnabas** on the first missionary journey and then joins **Barnabas** on return to Cyprus (last Luke tells us about Barnabas; later Mark becomes a secretary to **Peter**, travels with him; writes his **Gospel**, probably the first of the 4 Gospels; used by Matthew and Luke, using information he gathered from Peter's preaching and teaching (Papias, bishop of Hieropolis). Because of the conflict between Paul and Barnabas, which resulted in a diversity of missions and ministry, Mark was well prepared to write his Gospel, which not only recorded much of the life of Jesus but also interpreted that life.

Conclusion: In the case of Paul and Barnabas, diversity, conflict and controversy resulted in major advances – advances that may not have occurred without the controversy between Paul and Barnabas.

III. Conflict and diversity are contemporary issues in the life of a church/churches; when we see controversy, we can fear it, we can avoid it, or maybe we can learn from it and become a better caring, serving, and accepting people.

Conclusions:

When you see conflict, you know that there is life! When we have debates, disagreements, meaningful dialogue, you know that there is passion somewhere

Some guidelines – respect one another; defend the right to disagree (unity in diversity); maintain the right to have strong beliefs; learn from those with whom you disagree; realize that different settings, different backgrounds, different understandings, different influences, and different circumstances that shape and mold our beliefs and practices

A. Conflict is sometimes necessary, and diversity is a strength.

B. Conflict and diversity can be good, if we seek to honestly understand it, learn from it, and become better because of it.

C. Conflict – avoid it – but not all costs – you just might miss something very good.

D. I say all of this to encourage you to openly and actively participate in the meeting held by the Pastoral Search Committee following worship today. Do not be afraid to speak you, and do not be discouraged if things don't go your way. One of the great things about being a Christian and being a Baptist - we have a rich tradition of unity in our diversity. So may it be today!

A friend of mine, Ron Kemp had a small printed card on the shelf behind his office desk back in Missouri at the school where we taught. In a very real way, the slogan on the card accurately reflects my view about conflict. It is simply this, “We don’t have to be twins to be brothers.”