

At a glance

It's a given fact disagreements will eventually occur anywhere people live, work, or even worship together. How can Christians avoid the disruption Satan would like to cause from this fact of life?

## Sharp Contention

The devil has a very effective trick when he wants to sidetrack Kingdom work.

He doesn't send enemies to attack.

He doesn't bomb and blast the Church.

Acts 15:36-41

Instead he causes kingdom citizens to fuss and fight with each other. He stirs up mistrust, ill will, and disunity. He tears down instead of building up. He is the father of lies (John 8:44).

Jesus warned His followers about this. His instructions to them emphasized loving one another as a mark of loyalty to Him and as a witness to the world. We share a common faith and mission; we are on the same team.

But humans will be humans. We will disagree. How do we face conflict in a godly way?

The book of Acts includes more than one incident where men of God disagree. Perhaps the Holy Spirit included them as instruction for us.



## THE CHARACTERS

According to Acts 4:36-37, what was the nickname the apostles gave to Joseš? Why would they give him such a nickname? What do we know about his generosity? Just speculate about what it would be like to work and serve with a man like Joseš.

Who was John Mark? What relationships does the Scripture describe?

\_\_\_\_\_’s son (Acts 12:12)

\_\_\_\_\_’s nephew (or cousin) (Col 4:10)

\_\_\_\_\_’s son (figuratively) (1 Peter 5:13)

What internship opportunity did John Mark have? (Acts 12:25; 13:5)

Choose one or two words to describe the Apostle Paul.

What did Paul teach about getting along with other people?

Romans 12:18

2 Corinthians 13:11

Ephesians 4:2-3

Ephesians 4:32

Colossians 3:12-14

1 Thessalonians 5:13

What a missionary team! Imagine the zeal and theological insight of the Apostle Paul partnered with the compassion and encouragement of Barnabas. They were Spirit-filled, Spirit-led men on God's mission to build His Church. Their differences became complementary in their church-planting efforts.

Their practice of including younger men in their efforts—like Timothy and Titus—began with John Mark. He was from a believing family and had natural connections with Paul and Barnabas. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement. A younger, stronger worker could be assigned more physical tasks while listening to and learning from the wisdom and strategy of the more experienced team members. This practice is still valid in all kinds of areas of church ministry! Fresh ideas paired with experience are a blessing to Kingdom work, and neither should despise the other. Think about ways to team up in your local church and your women's group.

Let's consider the other issue here—one that is often the elephant in the room in small churches (and other small organizations): *nepotism*. Should family members get preferential treatment or selection in job assignments—even volunteer ones?

Often family members are the only choice, not just the best choice. Then we should rejoice and be thankful that families are raising up the next generation in a natural, godly internship or mentorship. This is a natural and appropriate partnership for spreading the gospel to the next generation. But when an exclusivity develops, where no one other than a family member is considered, or where there is preferential treatment based on family ties, feelings may be hurt and suspicions develop. Others may perceive improper dealings.

So work to do all things "decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40), with careful attention to open, inclusive procedures. Include as many people as you can in the work of the church! This is especially important in Kingdom efforts, in order to protect the reputation of the gospel.



## THE CONFLICT

What happened in between Acts 13:5 and Acts 13:13? Why did John Mark leave the team? Acts 15:38 should also inform your thinking on this. Look at Jesus' words in Luke 9:62 as well.

What other conflicts show up in the book of Acts and in Paul's epistles? Include the "newspaper headline" of each next to the reference.

Acts 6:1

Acts 11:1-4

Acts 15:1-2

Galatians 2:11-14

1 Corinthians 8

Romans 14:5

How does Acts 15:37-39 describe the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas?

Though we are not given enough information to know the validity of John Mark's decision to leave the team, we are certain Paul and Barnabas did not agree about giving him a second chance. As you would expect, Barnabas, the encourager, would have included (and did include) the younger man again.

This was not a doctrinal question or an issue the Bible directly addressed. However, this kind of disagreement involves conflict on many levels. There were obviously strong personalities involved. Close co-workers opposed each other, each with good arguments for his position. A young man was caught in between the two opinions and a supporting, commissioning church that did not know who was right. There was a strong shared mission. This was no what-color-should-the-carpet-be conflict. This contention was *sharp* and *painful*.

Inevitably, you will face similar conflicts, even with those you love most. Sometimes there is clearly a *right* and a *wrong* side, with biblical defense of a position. Other times, people hold strong viewpoints without a *chapter and verse* to back them up. What happens then?

Do you have to choose sides when it happens to those around you? How do you manage such sharp conflicts? Notice what the Bible says the church did in the middle of this sharp contention. Look hard. Look again. Barnabas departed with John Mark and they went in one direction; Paul took Silas and they went in another direction. And the

church? It commended them both to the grace of God. In other conflicts, they hand down a decision, they make a recommendation. They had major conferences about issues like circumcision and eating meat offered to idols and issued whole church proclamations for their decisions. But here, the church says “bless you!” and sends them on their separate ways.



## THE CHOICES

Here are some Scripture passages that give instruction for dealing with conflict. Beside each one, write a key word; then group them into strategic means for decision making.

Proverbs 14:29

Proverbs 15:1

Proverbs 21:14, 23

Proverbs 29:8, 11

Lamentations 3:59

Matthew 7:1-2

Romans 12:19-21

Romans 14:10, 13, 19

1 Corinthians 6:4-5

Ephesians 4:26

Ephesians 4:31

1 Thessalonians 5:17

James 1:5

James 1:19

James 4:11

We try to avoid these conflicts, but inevitably, they occur. We hold Scripture and its teaching in high regard, defending the truth. But not all issues are black and white, or even right or wrong. Many issues become divisive and have great potential for harm. What are your choices when you face sharp contentions?

**Give in.** Yes, you feel you are right. Yes, you have a good point. But is it worth stirring up bad feelings, accompanying issues, and complicated decisions to press your view? Can you make the sacrifice to give away your rights and in humility allow another's viewpoint to dictate the course of action?

**Let it go.** Sometimes we feel slighted and offended by another's decision or words. We want to defend ourselves and make sure others understand our position. Instead, though, we may choose to forgive them before they ask. We can assume the basic good will of our family/friends/fellow-workers/associates and make ourselves Teflon™ so these offences do not stick. We surrender our hurt and bad feelings, in confidence that no ill will was intended, and continue on.

**Stop and pray.** Often when those who disagree take the

matter to the Lord, He will help them to come to consensus. Don't minimize the powerful tool for insight and change the Lord has offered His children.

**Agree to disagree.** Without ill will or harbored grudges, we can allow someone to have a different viewpoint than we do. This means that we don't continue to criticize or gather a coalition against our opponent. We allow each other to go separate ways with two different viewpoints. Perhaps this is the way God starts two missionary teams instead of just one.

**Compromise is not a dirty word.** Sometimes, brainstorming for a middle ground is the best solution. Explore options, give and take, work for both parties to win in order to find common ground. Start with what you agree on in the decision. Maybe you can emphasize the most important aspects of the decision and find a way to work together.

**Seek an arbitrator.** Is there another trusted party who can hear both arguments and help the two sides come to agreement? This godly mediator may have insights on the problem that shed new light on the situation.



## THE CONSEQUENCES

After the sharp contention, where did Barnabas and John Mark go, according to Acts 15:39? What did Paul do? (Acts 15:40)

Years later, we see John Mark again in Paul's writings. In Colossians 4:9-10, he sends greetings to the church. Who are the others he is grouped with? What can you learn about him from this passage? Philemon 24 also mentions Mark. Do you think this is the same person? Why?

Paul's mention of John Mark in 2 Timothy 4:10-11 is especially interesting. Who does Paul use as a contrast to John Mark (verse 10)? How does he describe John Mark in verse 11? What does that make you think about second chances?

Could there have been another ending to this sharp contention between missionaries Paul and Barnabas? If these mature Christian men had worked through the controversy in other ways, could the church have been damaged? Might missionary efforts be interrupted? Yes! But even in their sharp contention, these men protected the ministry of the gospel. They remained co-laborers for the Kingdom.

In fact, the reason for their division, John Mark, went on to be "useful" to Paul, beloved by Peter, and a biographer of Jesus (in the Gospel of Mark).

So what about the sharp contentions that pop up in your family, your neighborhood, your workplace, or your church? Seek a means of managing them that will let your story end like this one. You want the people involved to continue to love each other; you want the work of the Kingdom to be unhindered. You want the best for each other and the growth of all concerned. This requires incredible wisdom and may even need heavenly solutions! Is anything too hard for God?

Live peaceably with each other, allowing patience, meekness, kindness, and self-control to mark your Spirit-filled life. In all that you do, seek to bring honor to Him. ❧

**About the Writer:** Carol Reid edits *FUSION* and *FUSIONnext* devotional magazines at Randall House Publications. She and her husband Garnett worship at The Donelson Fellowship (Nashville), where he serves as pastor of older adults. Carol loves books, bargain shopping, chocolate with nuts, and crafts; she does not love cleaning house.