

CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE – YET WELCOME!

Baptist Times 31 March 2005

Where two or three are gathered together in Jesus' name...then there is almost bound to be conflict at one time or another.

Much of the conflict that takes place in church life is rooted in human sinfulness and dishonours God's name. Such conflict kills the mission of the church – and kills off too the faith of many a young believer. I am a firm believer in the Baptist church meeting: when it works well, it works very well indeed; but when it fails, it fails miserably. 'Why go and pay £100 to see Frank Bruno fight', said one young man, 'when you can see a fight for nothing at the Baptist church'. Today this young man no longer attends any church – and not surprisingly so. Sadly, most – if not all – churches have had their church meetings degenerate into a bear garden at one time or another. This is a crying shame. And yet we should not be surprised. Conflict is inevitable, for we are all sinners.

But not all church conflict is sinful. Low-level conflict can be positive and up-building. I find it fascinating how Paul, in a context of unity, urges his fellow-Christians to 'speak the truth in love' to one another (Eph 4.15): such speaking the truth in love inevitably involves expressions of disagreement and difference. Churches which for "love's" sake suppress the expression of disagreement and difference, suppress at the same time "the truth". For the truth is that the body of Christ is made up of many different kinds of individuals with different experiences and different points of view: it is only as these experiences and points of view are shared that we can grow together in maturity in the kind of way that Paul envisages (Eph 5.16). It is therefore right and proper that at church meetings members are allowed to express their concerns, their differences, their disagreements – although a loving presiding over the meeting is essential.

This understanding of low-level conflict is surely behind Prov 27.17: "Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another" (NRSV). It is precisely through the clash of ideas that progress is often made. It is in the powerful exchange of ideas that "People learn from one another" (Prov 27.17 GNB). The fact that the pastor is called to be a leader does not mean that he therefore has a monopoly of the Holy Spirit's wisdom. A church where the pastor is surrounded by a group of 'yes-men' as deacons is much the poorer. Certainly no pastor should be able to select his (and it is normally 'his') leaders – for the very real danger is that the pastor then selects people like-minded to him. My church is the stronger precisely because our leadership team is made up of disparate people who are not all in the pastor's mould!

For some pastors this kind of thinking can be disturbing. They long for the quiet life (and so too at times do I!) – they long for leaders' meetings and church meetings where differences are not expressed, where all is sweetness and light. But such 'rubber-stamping' does a disservice to the church. Where healthy conflict is present, there issues get more fully explored, better decisions are made, and people become more committed to those decisions.

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