

ACTS 15.1-35: CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION [Chelmsford 28 June 2009]

Have you ever been involved in a really heated argument?

It's not pleasant, is it?

It's even worse when the argument takes place in church.

Sadly there was a time in the life of this church when the church meeting resembled a bear-garden or indeed a battlefield. People came to fight their corner – and in so doing they sometimes said dreadful things about one another.

Thank God, those days are well and truly gone.

Last week's church meeting was an amazingly happy and unifying experience.

I. CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE

But the truth of the matter is that conflict in the church is inevitable.

For every church is made up of people of flesh and blood.

It is no exaggeration to say that *'where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name... then there is almost bound to be conflict at one time or another'*.

No, I can't pretend that this maxim is to be found in one particular Scripture text – but it is a maxim which has its roots in the whole of the New Testament.

Sadly conflict was a reality in Jerusalem, in Corinth, in Philippi and in many other places too. It was also a reality in the church at Antioch.

There a really passionate church fight took place.

Listen to the first two verses of Acts 15: **"Some men came from Judea to Antioch and started teaching the believers, 'You cannot be saved unless you are circumcised as the Law of Moses requires'. But Paul and Barnabas got into a fierce argument with them"**. Or as the NRSV more prosaically states: *"Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them"*.

If you want a flavour of the argument, turn to Paul's Letter to the Galatians.

For there Paul was tackling the same issue – and he didn't mince his words.

Let me read to you Gal 1.6-11 in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*: **"I can't believe your fickleness – how easily you have turned traitor to him who called you by the grace of Christ by embracing a variant message! It is not a minor variation, you know; it is completely other, an alien message, a no-message, a lie about God. Those who are provoking this agitation among you are turning the Message of Christ on its head. Let me be blunt: If one of us – even if an angel from heaven! – were to preach something other than what we preached originally, let him be cursed. I said it once; I'll say it again: If anyone, regardless of reputation or credentials, preaches something other than what you received originally, let him be cursed"** – cursed in the sense of being sent to hell.

Paul certainly didn't believe in pulling any punches.

What exactly had happened?

Paul and Barnabas had gone throughout Asia Minor – present-day Turkey – preaching the Good News of Jesus.

At each town they had visited, they began their missionary work within the Jewish community – they went to the local synagogue and preached Jesus.

But time and again they were thrown out of the synagogues, and so they started preaching to non-Jews, and in doing so they met with considerable success.

But their success led to trouble. The trouble was not that non-Jews were being converted, but rather how they were being converted. For Paul and his friends were allowing these non-Jews to become church members without circumcision.

But for some of the Christians in Jerusalem that was unthinkable – it was heresy – in their book you had to become a Jew first in order to become a Christian. **“You cannot be saved unless you are circumcised as the Law of Moses requires”** (15.1).

Nonsense, said Paul, **“a person is put right with God only through faith in Jesus Christ, never doing what the Law requires”** (Gal 2.16).

For Paul a massive principle was at stake. He saw himself fighting for the Gospel. And so **“a fierce argument developed”** (15.2)

Here we see that, from time to time, conflict is inevitable in church life.

II. CONFLICT CAN BE HEALTHY

Far too much conflict in church life is far from healthy.

According to one American researcher: *“On any given day in perhaps three-quarters of all churches the ministry of that congregation is reduced significantly as a result of non-productive conflict. In perhaps one-fourth of all churches that internal conflict is so sufficiently severe that it must be reduced before the parish can redirect its energies and resources towards formulating new goals and expanding its ministry”* (Schaller).

Certainly the conflict which at one stage took place in our church was incredibly unhealthy. The conflict caused people to leave the church in despair – it even caused some people to give up believing all together.

Others remained in the church – but gave up on the church meeting.

It was God-dishonouring and faith-destroying conflict.

BUT – and it is an important ‘but’ - not all conflict is sinful.

Low-level conflict can actually be healthy.

Joyce Huggett in her book *Conflict: Friend or Foe* wrote: *“Friction in the fellowship need not be feared. Friction, the rubbing together of opposites, sometimes even opposing, viewpoints and personalities, is an integral part of firm relationships. Fellowship breeds friction. You can’t have one without the other”*.

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 – but it also, says Paul, leads to growth in the body. **“By speaking the truth in a spirit of love, we must grow up in every way to Christ, who is the head”**.

This understanding of low-level conflict is surely behind Prov 27.17, which in the NRSV reads: **“Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wit of another”**.

It is precisely through the clash of ideas that progress is often made.
It is in the powerful exchange of views that “**people learn from one another**” (GNB).
A church is the stronger when people are able to disagree with one another.
According to one conflict management guru: “*Unless an organization encourages regular and thorough internal challenge to what it has been doing, it is unlikely to be able to keep up with the changing world*” (Speed Leas).

I fully admit that I don't like mega conflict.
But I have benefited no end from friendly conflict – where it is not about winning argument, but discovering the best way forward.
I would not want my leadership team to be made up of ‘yes’ men – and, dare I say it, I am glad when in the church meeting people are able to express another point of view.
God has given us one another, so that we can learn from one another.

III. CONFLICT MAY BE RESOLVED BY:-

To return to the conflict at Antioch, the issue was deemed so serious, that it was referred to the wider church, and in particular to the church at Jerusalem.
There the issue was resolved through:

1. *A sharing of differences*

That states the obvious – but sometimes the obvious has to be stated.
Just as there can be unhealthy conflict, so too there can be unhealthy agreement.
Some families are so dysfunctional that the only way they can handle difference is by pretending that differences don't exist.
Churches too can be too dysfunctional, or perhaps too fragile, to handle differences.
But it is not healthy to sweep matters under the carpet.
We need to face our differences with a view to resolving those differences
But that is unreal: inevitably we have different opinions.
We need to be able express our opinions with a view to finding what is God's perspective on the issue.
The fact is “*a good argument is a great achievement*” (John Courtney Murray, SJ)

So in Jerusalem “**a long debate**” (15.7) ensued where the motion, this house believes that “**the Gentiles must be circumcised and told to obey the law of Moses**”, was put by “**some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees**” (15.5), and opposed by Paul and Barnabas. But it was more than a debate.
It was part of the process of seeking God's will for the church's life together

2. *A sharing of experiences*

The process of seeking God's will involved the sharing of experiences.
Peter shared his experience of taking the Good News to the Gentile world, and in particular to the occasion when the Holy Spirit fell upon the Roman soldier Cornelius and his friends.

For Peter this was an eye-opening experience – to his amazement he discovered that God could pour out his Spirit even on non-Jews: **“God made no difference between us and them; he forgave their sins because they believed... We are saved by the grace of God, just as they are”** (15.9,11).

Paul and Barnabas likewise shared their experience: they reported **“all the miracles and wonders that God had performed through them among the Gentiles”** (15.12)

There is a key difference between arguing a case and sharing an experience. To share an experience is to tell what we have seen – it is to tell our story. It is amazing how experiences can change our minds, and can change the minds of others too. The fact is that all too often we put God into a box – and then he surprises us by acting outside the box.

3. *Theological reflection.*

James, the senior pastor of the church and the brother of Jesus, sought to root the discussion in Scripture. **“The words of the prophets agree completely with this”** (v15), he said. He quoted from Amos 9.11-12 where the Lord declared: **“All the rest of the human race will come to me, all the Gentiles whom I have called to be my own”**. The Scriptures, he said, show that that God intended non-Jews also to be members of his Kingdom.

Not every church argument can be resolved by a direct appeal to the Scriptures, but it is surprising how often the Scriptures contain principles relevant to church life. The Scriptures, for instance, did not tell us that we should redevelop our building, but they did support our desire to reach out in new ways to people beyond our church. Time and again God guides his people through his Word.

4. *Listening together*

The apostles and the elders, together no doubt with the church as a whole, **‘considered the question’** (15.6). Unlike some whose minds are made up before they consider the facts, they were open to taking a fresh look at the issue concerned. There’s a challenge for us when we come to a church meeting – are we truly ready to listen to one another?

Unlike the House of Commons, where because party politics is the name of the game, people often heckle one another, Luke tells us that: **“The whole group was silent as they heard Barnabas and Paul”** (15.12). The clear impression is that people were listening – they were listening to one another and to one another’s experiences; they were also listening to the voice of God, not just within people’s experience, but also from within Scripture too.

5. *Leaders leading.*

James, in his role as leader of the church, allowed everybody to have their say. But he drew things to a conclusion by making a proposal: **“It is my opinion that we should not trouble the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead, we should write a letter telling them not to eat any food that is ritually unclean because it has been offered to idols; to keep themselves from sexual immorality; nor to eat any animal that has been strangled, or any blood”** (15.19-20).

“It is my opinion” – *“I have reached the decision”* (NRSV)

Some have suggested that he was just being a good chairman and expressing in his own words the sense of the meeting – or was he actually giving a stronger lead than simply being a good chairman?

I think that James was actually exercising his authority as leader of the church. Yes, he could have been out-voted. He was not forcing the church to make a particular decision. However, in the light of all that had been said, he ‘judged’ (*krino*) that non-Jews did not need to become Jews in order to be saved.

Some people have seen James as offering a compromise solution – the Gentiles don’t need to follow the Jewish ritual law and be circumcised, but they do need to follow the Jewish food law and eat only kosher food.

But that is to misunderstand James. James proposed that although non-Jews did not need to be circumcised to be saved, they did need to abstain from attending pagan temples and all the practices associated with pagan temples. In particular he banned:

- no eating **“food...offered to idols”** – that would be God dishonouring
- no **“sexual immorality”** i.e. no prostitution in the name of religion – the word James uses (*porneia*) does not refer to having sex outside marriage, but rather to having sex with a temple prostitute

James then elaborated on the first practice: there must be no eating of animals that **“have been strangled or of any blood”**. In pagan worship priests used to choke animals offered for sacrifice with a view to transferring its life breath into the idols they worshipped – indeed as part of the sacrificial ritual there was a formal tasting of blood.

I freely acknowledge that James’ compromise solution is remote from our experience. Circumcision is no longer an issue, nor indeed is pagan temple worship.

What is, however, relevant to us is that James took a lead.

Leaders are called to lead – and to lead not least within a church meeting.

Yes, everybody has a voice – but some voices weigh more than others.

Leaders need to lead – without at the same time coercing people to follow their direction.

6. *Spiritual discernment*

The church resolved the issue at the end by consciously seeking God’s will. So much so that at the end they could say: **“the Holy Spirit and we have agreed”** (15.28)

The Holy Spirit was at work through the church’s decision-making. It is this principle which underlies the Baptist understanding of the church meeting.

Baptists have defined the church meeting as *“the occasion when as individuals and as a community, we submit ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and stand under the judgement of God that we may know the mind of Christ”*.

Some people describe the church meeting as the church business meeting – but that is to downgrade what happens. The church meeting is an exercise in practical spirituality.

The church in Jerusalem was not seeking to be democratic. As one commentator put it: *“Democracy which honours important values, seeks the will of the majority; discernment seeks the will of God and the mind of Christ”* (Robinson & Wall).

Conflict can be resolved when instead of arguing for what we want, we seek to discover what God wants.

7. *Congregational involvement*

Finally do note how throughout Acts 15 the church as a whole was involved. At Antioch, for instance, it was the church that **“decided that Paul and Barnabas”** should go to Jerusalem to consult with the church there (15.2), and it was the church which **“sent”** Paul and Barnabas **“on their way”** (15.3)

When Paul & Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem, **“they were welcomed by the church”**, and not just by the apostles and the elders” (15.5).

A church meeting was then called to consider the issue of the admission of non-Jews in the church. Although v6 states that **“the apostles and the elders met together to consider this question”**, v12 makes it clear that the church as a whole was present: **“the whole group... heard Paul and Silas”**. The same phrase is used in 15.22 where Luke talks of **“the whole group of believers”** gathering together for a church meeting.

What’s more, we see in 15.22 that the church didn’t just listen in to proceedings: the church was actively involved in decision-making (**“the apostles and elders, together with the whole church”**). Yes, Paul, Peter and James had key roles to play – but so too had ordinary church members.

Here at Central Baptist Church we too seek to involve the church as a whole in key decision-making. The other week, it was the church as a whole which elected new deacons, and which called Nicholas and Amanda Tuohy. One of the great privileges of being a member of a Baptist church is that we can be involved in seeking God’s will for our life together. Sometimes this involves resolving conflict – but thank God, it involves so much more.

Let me end with another definition of the church meeting: the church meeting is *“the place where all members meet together regularly and, in an atmosphere of prayer, share their deepest concerns and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit about all the matters which affect their common life as the family of God”* (Daniel Webster). Wow, if we truly put that principle into action, any conflict would always be low-level!