

“WHEN CHRISTIANS HAVE CONFLICT.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Acts 15:36-41

Prayer: Holy Father, thank you for your Holy Word, for its truth and testimony of you, for its commands and promises, for its wisdom and power, its light and help. By your Spirit and grace help us to profit from you Word now for the sake of your glory and our souls. Amen.

Introduction.

Permit me to begin by asking a dumb question. I know teachers say there are no dumb questions, but I have come up with one. Have any of you ever had a disagreement, argument, conflict, misunderstanding, dispute with someone else?

I told you it was a dumb question. If you are human and you live in close proximity with other humans, you have experienced conflict, disagreement, argument. In fact, I would be willing to go out on a limb and say you probably have experienced a conflict in the past month, week, day, this morning getting ready for or coming to worship.

Paul and Barnabas.

This morning we are privy to a personal and private quarrel between two leaders. Not just any two leaders, Paul, and Barnabas, two apostles, two great pillars in the early church.

The first thing that is shocking about this conflict is who it is between.

Paul and Barnabas had a long, close relationship. Barnabas was the instrument used by God to bring Paul into the fellowship of the church that he had previously persecuted. Barnabas stood up for him. They had both been called and set apart by the Holy Spirit for the first missionary journey. They had labored together in very difficult circumstances, were foxhole buddies. They had experienced tremendous favor from God and seen much success from their labors.

They were brothers in Christ, full of the Holy Spirit, seeing eye to eye on the great and important doctrines of the church. In the great Jerusalem council debate we read about them:

Acts 15:12 All the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

The very best of men are still men, still sinners, still capable of great conflict even over relatively trivial matters, and subject to their own sinful dispositions.

They are men, not supermen, not angels. They are like us. We are like them. We all walk with limps; we are all fatally flawed. We all have a log in our own eye, far bigger than the specks we see in everyone else's eyes.

There will always be times when there will be differences between two good people, even those who are best of friends, or closest of companions or those united in marriage or Christian fellowship in a church. I have experienced losing a good friend to conflict.

If it can happen between Paul and Barnabas, how much more vulnerable are all of us. We should be more vigilant than ever to Satan's attempts to stir up conflict between brothers and sisters in Christ. We should be humbled by this example, and watch ourselves, being humble, repentant, willing to be wrong and willing to be wronged.

We must never take any of our relationships for granted. We should "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bear with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:2-3).

The Cause of the Conflict.

The second thing that is shocking about this conflict is what it is over?

What is the cause of this conflict? Who is to blame? We like to assign blame, we like to take sides, so who do we think is at fault here, Paul, Barnabas, both, neither John Mark?

Here is the situation. On the first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas were sent out and John Mark went with them. First they sailed to the island of Cyprus, and then from there

Acts 13:13 Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem.

We are not given any details about why, so we can only speculate. Perhaps he was too young, too inexperienced, was it sickness, homesickness, too fearful or anxious, too immature for carrying the cross of Christ's sufferings which they would face again and again.

Mission work is hard work. We should remember this as we pray for Dustin and Melissa Leland as they start out. What they are doing is not easy, not a fairy tale adventure.

Paul and Barnabas are fighting over who to take on a mission trip. This is not some great doctrinal issue, this is a difference of opinion, a judgment call.

Paul had lost confidence in John Mark, he had proved fickle, unreliable. Mark deserted his post, deserted his calling, didn't keep his vows when it got hard. Trust had been broken and it was too soon to know if it could be restored.

On the other hand we have Barnabas who was a cousin to John Mark. Is this a case of blood being thicker than water? We can't blame Barnabas for wanting to give his younger cousin a second chance. We already know Barnabas was an encourager and a reconciler.

Barnabas is motivated by his affection for Mark.

Paul was jealous for the cause of Christ and the advance of the Gospel.

Barnabas could quote the Scripture, "Encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all." Paul could argue leaders in the church should be above reproach, and well-tested. One stressed mercy, the other stressed character.

Our hearts go with Barnabas, our heads go with Paul. In some ways this looks like the classic difference between a task-oriented person and a people-oriented person. What is more important, the work or the person? I would guess if I put it to a vote here today we would be divided along those lines.

This is a great failure. Two great godly men separated. There is no mention of praying, of seeking help, the counsel of the elders. Nowhere do they say that it seemed good to them and the Holy Spirit that they double their ministry by separating. There is no harmonious conclusion.

The disagreement is so sharp, so deep, so unyielding it cannot be resolved, and these men whose friendship goes back at least 15 years, and who owe each other so much, part company over a secondary issue.

It is heart breaking and hard to understand how a seemingly trivial disagreement could bring two such brothers into such serious disagreement and even irreconcilable separation.

Isn't that true of so many of our conflicts, they are over secondary things, small stuff?

How often have any of us gone too far, gone overboard in our conflicts, in our trying to make our case, prove we are right, win the argument at all costs? Majoring in minors. Stubbornness and obstinacy and hardheadedness are not spiritual gifts.

How often do we fail to seek the wisdom and counsel of the elders or godly mature Christians? How often do we fail to push pause and pray and seek the Holy Spirit's intervention and direction?

The Result of the Conflict.

What happens as a result of this terrible conflict? Did this turn into a train wreck? Is the cause of Christ hindered? Does the advance of the Gospel come to a screeching halt? Does Satan win? Is God sovereign over conflict, is God sovereign over sin? Is God able to turn it to good?

The third shocking thing about conflict is that it is always redeemable by a sovereign God.

If God were not sovereign over sin, there would be nothing left in this world for Him to be sovereign over. There are no perfect people or perfect situations. God only uses broken vessels and broken situations. Sin never wins, it always bends to serve God's own purposes. God rules over human folly.

The quarrels and differences and separation of the Apostles results in the furtherance of the Gospel. The spreading of the Gospel is multiplied. Barnabas and John Mark return to Cyprus, which was where Barnabas was from. Paul and Silas return to Asia Minor where Paul was from.

Barnabas was a great lose, but Silas was a great gain. He was a Roman citizen like Paul, spoke Greek, became Paul's secretary, handwriting both letters to the Thessalonians.

We never can see the whole picture; God sees the whole. Satan tries to steal, kill, and destroy, but God overrules Satan every time, and builds and adds and multiplies.

This is never an excuse to sin or to fight, but it is an encouragement when we are defeated by our sin and discouraged by our circumstances.

It doesn't mean we can sin and be cavalier about it, but it does mean we can be humbly aware of God's grace and mercy and worship Him for how He brings good out of our messes. God beautifies every situation despite how ugly we make things.

Always stay open to what our sovereign God is doing in all situations and circumstance. Be open to the move of the Holy Spirit who changes hearts and situations. Don't write off people forever, don't assume no good can come or no situation can be turned around.

Remember my words last week in my charge to Pastor Mike: Never doubt that God can change people and situations, can resolve conflicts, and bring peace where there has been trouble.

God can bring good out of every conflict. Listen to two verses from Paul's letters:

Colossians 4:10 Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him),

II Timothy 4:11 Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.

John Mark was a very blessed man to have such a mentor and friend like Barnabas. It is a huge gift to have someone who believes in you, especially after you have failed, someone who stands beside you no matter what, someone who helps you along this path of life.

Is there someone in your life that others have given up on that you could reach out to and make a difference? Everyone needs a Barnabas in their life. Who can you be a Barnabas to?

Be encouraged by this. There will always be conflict, but God can and will bring good. God is never done with us, never done forgiving us, never done teaching us how to forgive. Can we see that it is more often from our failures than our successes that we grow the most, become humbled and more dependent on God?

It is also true that what we call failures may not be from God's perspective. This isn't to excuse them but to learn from them, grow through them and be confident of God's hand sovereignly ruling and directing and controlling the outcome.

“The defeats of God's people are always temporary. The cause of God will triumph through all the weaknesses and failures of his people” (John Piper).

Last weekend we had a family gathering as we all tried to soak up as much time with Kent and Becky and their two kids before they move to Chicago/Wheaton. So a bunch of family under one roof. At one point something was said that someone else misunderstood, took the wrong way and was hurt by. It was the kind of thing that if left undealt with, could have remained between the two. But in the mercy of God that person brought it up a little later and there was opportunity to completely clear the air and restore and be reconciled.

In that moment I thanked the person for honoring the other by having the courage and taking the risk of seeking understanding. I share how I have had experiences in my churches of finding out about a misunderstanding a couple of years later long after the hurt, and with no way of healing that much ill will.

Romans 12:16-18 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Making peace is not easy, and it doesn't always work. It can be costly and risky. But it ought to be pursued as far as possible, in so far as it depends on us. Truly blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God.

Implications and application.

Why did the Holy Spirit inspire Luke to write down this most unfortunate personal disagreement between two Christian brothers? What is the Spirit saying to us, what does He want us to learn?

Conflict is absolutely inevitable. If you are human and breathing you will have conflict. It is a result of our fallen nature, of the sin that is bound up in all our hearts. But God is not absent from it, He is in the midst using it, directing it. God is bigger than our problems.

And God has created the hope and possibility of resolution and reconciliation. The cross of Jesus addresses the greatest conflict in the universe, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, by the power of the blood of Jesus, by the grace of forgiveness, confession and repentance, there is great hope.

God has given us the means to have victory over our sin, our pride, our stubbornness, our lack of humility, our lack of grace or kindness.

This table addresses the greatest conflict ever, the offense of our sin against our holy creator God. This is God's reaching out to resolve the conflict, to reconcile us to Him. This is God's grace for a second chance. This table is for sinners, for failures. This table says that's what we are, sinners, failures.

This table says my sin has become Christ's sin, and Christ's righteousness has become my righteousness. My contribution to this transaction is sin, debt, transgression. Jesus' contribution to this transaction is His righteousness. He took on to Himself what is ours and He set up us what is His.

When you are down, depressed, in despair over your sin and failure and shortcomings, look on Jesus and Him crucified. This is the power of God which is greater than all our sin, all our pride, all our stubbornness, all our anger and hate.

His body given; His blood shed for all our sins. And if He treated our conflict with Him with this much grace, how much more can we give grace to each other in our conflicts. Let us forgive as He has forgiven us. Let us pursue reconciliation as He has pursued us.