

SERIES: Great Church Fights

SERMON: **When Personality and Perspective Clash**

SCRIPTURE: Acts 15:36-41; Phil. 4:2,3

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Is there anyone here this morning who likes everyone you work with, everyone at school, and everyone in your neighborhood? I didn't think so. If anyone raised his hand, I would be inclined to ask, "Do you lie about other things, too?" I don't think it's possible to like everybody. Some people have personalities so different from ours that it takes a yeoman's effort just to be pleasant to them, to say nothing of seeking them out and spending time with them. Some people also have weird ideas, which means ideas different from ours.

Differences of personality and opinion are also inevitable in the church, as everywhere else. And Scripture makes it abundantly clear that disagreements in and of themselves are not always wrong—the question is, "How are they handled?"

So far in our series on conflict we have examined one conflict that was negative and one that was positive. Today we are going to look at two conflicts in the early church that I would call morally neutral. That is, they are neither particularly positive nor particularly negative, neither good nor evil. They just happened. One is a conflict between two well-known men and the other between two little-known women.

The two men, whose situation we will examine first, are Paul and Barnabas, and our Scripture text is found in the last paragraph of Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas have just returned to their home church at Antioch from their first missionary journey to Asia Minor. Their reports of thousands of Gentiles converting from paganism stir up a great deal of excitement, and Paul and Barnabas can hardly wait to get back on the road again.

But further missionary work must be postponed until a vital question affecting the whole Church can be faced and settled. As we saw last week, the church in Jerusalem was composed almost exclusively of converts from Judaism. When Paul and Barnabas report that thousands of Gentiles are turning to Christ, this looms as a significant threat to some in the Jerusalem church. Who is going to be calling the shots in the future? How can they maintain high standards in the church when thousands are joining who have no background of godly moral standards?

In Acts 15 we find the Jerusalem church sending some representatives to visit the Antioch church apparently to bring that church back under the control of the traditions of the Jerusalem church. They view Christianity as almost a sect of Judaism, and they want to make sure the Gentiles keep the Mosaic Law and Jewish customs. Let's begin our reading in Acts 15:1:

"Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them (i.e. with the visitors from Jerusalem). So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with

some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

This issue threatened a complete cleavage between the churches with predominantly Jewish converts and those with predominantly Gentile converts. The dispute needed to be decided at the highest level—by the Apostles in Jerusalem. Thankfully it was; they recognized that God was indeed accepting Gentiles into His spiritual family *as Gentiles*. James delivers the Council’s verdict in verse 19: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.” Peace was thus maintained and the believers in Antioch rejoiced as a result.

But no sooner had the unity of the Antioch church been rescued from the legalists in Jerusalem than it was threatened again by two events. One was Peter’s visit to Antioch when he played the hypocrite, which was the subject of last Sunday’s sermon. The second was a disagreement between the two outstanding leaders and missionary representatives—Paul and Barnabas. Fresh from a major doctrinal battle in Jerusalem in which they fought side-by-side and won a resounding victory, these two now find themselves in disagreement with each other over personality and perspective. In the last paragraph of Acts 15 we read about it, beginning in verse 36:

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."

Paul and Barnabas call it Splitsville in Antioch. (Acts 15:36-41)

The problem: dissension between colleagues. The principal issue between Paul and Barnabas was over whether they should take John Mark on a second missionary journey they were planning. I would remind you, however, that this may not have been the only factor in this conflict. Last Sunday we saw how Barnabas caved when Peter came to Antioch and joined Peter in his hypocrisy. Paul complained in Galatians 2, “even Barnabas joined him in his charade.” I wouldn’t be surprised if that issue played a part in their splitting up, but apparently the principal reason was John Mark.

Barnabas wanted to take Mark along but Paul didn't because John Mark had deserted them during the first journey. Look back one page at Acts 13:13: "From Pathos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem." While Luke doesn't tell us why he left, it was obviously for reasons Paul deemed insufficient. It may have been because of persecution or hardship or even homesickness.

We do know John Mark was young, that he was Barnabas' cousin, and that he was from a prominent family. His mother, whose name was Mary, is mentioned several times in the NT. She is the one, according to Acts 12:12, who owned the home in Jerusalem to which Peter came after his miraculous escape from prison. Furthermore, early church tradition holds that it was her home where the Last Supper was held and where the disciples met in Jerusalem after the ascension.

At any rate, Barnabas wanted to give John Mark a second chance, but Paul would have none of it! You see, Paul was tough while Barnabas was tender. We could guess at why they each felt the way they did about John Mark, but fortunately we don't have to guess because an archaeologist friend of mine has recently dug up a stenographer's notebook dated A.D. 51 which purports to be the record of a conversation between Paul and Barnabas in an elder's meeting at the First Apostolic Missionary Free Church of Antioch. I would not lay my life on its authenticity, but neither would I reject it out of hand. At any rate, here it is—you decide. Paul speaks first.

Paul: Mark? We can't take him. He failed us last time.

Barnabas: But that was last time.

Paul: He'll fail us again. He's a deserter.

Barnabas: No, he's not a "deserter." He's a person who happened to desert once. He's had time to think it over. We've got to give him another chance. He's got the makings of a good missionary.

Paul: Tell me, Barnabas, isn't it just because he's your cousin that you want to take him again?

Barnabas: That's a low blow, Paul. Some of my best friends are not cousins. I'm just convinced this lad needs understanding and help.

Paul: We need someone who can stand up to persecution, angry mobs, beatings, perhaps jail. Our team has to be close-knit, thoroughly reliable. How can we trust a lad like Mark with that kind of responsibility? No, Barnabas. Recall the words of the Master: "No man who puts his hand to the plow, and looks back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Barnabas: You're quoting Scripture pretty selectively, aren't you Paul? Jesus also said, "If you

forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” Besides, I've talked with him about his failure. He's very sorry. I'm sure he won't defect again. To refuse to let him go with us might do spiritual damage at the very moment of his repentance. It'd be like breaking a bruised reed.

Paul: Barnabas, there's too much at stake here. The risk is too great. I won't do it. Either you leave Mark at home or I'll have to go without you. That's final.

Barnabas: Then, I guess you'll have to go without me, Paul. But I'm not going to stay here in Antioch. You know, God called me to the mission field, too. I'll take Mark with me and I'll show you how wrong you were. One of these days you'll regret your attitude toward Mark.

Paul: Just don't get in my way. I'm heading back to Asia Minor and I don't want to run into the two of you.

Pause

Barnabas: Paul?

Paul: What do you want?

Barnabas: Paul, this isn't right. I'm sorry for some of the things I said. I love you, brother. I want the best for you. If we can't work together, at least let's part as friends.

Paul: I agree, Barnabas. I'm sorry, too. Listen, why don't you go to Cyprus, where you've had such a significant ministry in the past. I give you my blessing. Write to me so I can hear how God is using you.

Barnabas: Will do, and God bless you, Paul. Take care you don't get stoned again in Lystra (Pardon the pun)! Meet you back here in Antioch!ⁱ

As I said, I wouldn't stake my life on the authenticity of this document, but I do believe it's not far from what may have happened.

The solution chosen: separation. (39-41) The decision by Paul and Barnabas comes in verse 39—they will each go his own way with a new partner. Don't think for a moment this wasn't painful. It'd be like Moody and Sankey parting ways, or Billy Graham and Cliff Barrows. I don't know if fault can be laid at the feet of either Paul or Barnabas. It's interesting to read some of the commentators who say they were both at fault because nowhere in Luke's account does it say that these two prayed about their dispute. Others side with Paul, pointing out that in verse 40 the church commends Paul and Silas to the grace of the Lord, but nothing is said of any commendation for Barnabas and Mark. That, of course, is totally an argument from silence.

Still others side with Barnabas, noting that later on Paul acknowledges John Mark's recovery to

ministry. For example, in Col. 4:10 Paul writes from prison and says, “My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)” Then at the end of his life as Paul awaits certain execution in Rome, he writes to Timothy in 2 Tim. 4:11 and says, “Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.” And not of least significance, John Mark is the disciple who wrote the Gospel of Mark. Barnabas’ confidence in his future seems to have been well-placed.

Nevertheless, it is my feeling we don’t know enough about this dispute to side with either Paul or Barnabas. The whole incident is a classic example of the perpetual question of whether to place the interests of the individual before the ministry as a whole. There is simply no rule of thumb that serves in all situations. When I served on the Board of Ministerial Standing of our denomination, no matter what decision we made about a particular pastoral discipline case, there were always those who disagreed, sometimes strongly. Either they thought we had been too lenient with the pastor and therefore put the ministry at risk, or we were too harsh with him in order to protect the ministry.

If there is one thing we can learn from the conflict between Paul and Barnabas, I believe it is that God can bring good out of conflict if we will let him. He did in this case.

The result: multiplication. Instead of one missionary team there are now two. And in the succeeding years God uses both teams in great ways.

I feel compelled to comment about an issue that rather frequently arises in the church today. A pastor and a church’s leadership have conflict. The pastor is asked to leave. A group of his supporters urge him to start a new church. He agrees. The church splits. We’ve seen it happen here in Wichita just in the past two years. Sometimes the pastor justifies his action on the basis of the Paul and Barnabas story. I don’t buy it. Paul and Barnabas split up but both of them left Antioch and did missionary work in pioneer areas.

I don’t think there is any excuse for a pastor to start a new church within the ministry area of his previous congregation without the approval of the governing board of that church. In fact, our denomination wisely adopted a rule that any pastor who did so would lose his credentials. Certainly there are times when a pastor’s dismissal is questionable, even unjustifiable, and those times are painful not only to the pastor, but to many in the congregation, but I believe it’s *always wrong* to split a church. Better for that pastor to surrender the injustice to God and look for ministry elsewhere.

Now I want us to consider another similar situation, only this one concerns two women. We have to be very careful these days, you know, to be balanced between the genders. It’s not hard when it comes to conflict. We don’t have as much information about their disagreement, but let’s see what we can learn anyway.

Euodia and Syntyche “have at it” in the Church at Philippi.

(Philippians 4:2-3) *"I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with*

each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life."

Apparently these two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who have been unfairly nicknamed Odious and Soontouchy, developed some kind of disagreement. Perhaps it was over musical style; perhaps it had to do with some changes introduced into the Women's Missionary Fellowship; it may have been some difference in theology.

But please notice Paul's affirmation that "these women have contended at my side in the cause of the Gospel." These were not two women sitting on the sidelines taking potshots at the ministry; rather they were active and valuable members of the Body. I suspect a rather common dynamic in human relationships was at work here. It is not unusual for people to assume ownership of something they have poured their hearts and lives into. And that's fine to a point. But when that sense of ownership goes too far and they begin to assume that ownership means having their own way, trouble starts brewing.

This is especially true in church planting. I have been involved in the planting of about twenty-five churches, some as a member of the church planting committee, others as pastor of the mother church, one as a church planter myself. In nearly every church plant tension develops at some point between the people who sacrificed the most to get the work started and those who come along later and reap the benefits. The difficulty is not so much that the original people are unwilling to involve others so much as that they develop a very protective attitude toward the work. They have put so much into the ministry and fear the new leaders might not be quite so concerned about the church's welfare. It is not unlike the case of a new mother having to leave her infant with a babysitter for the first time.

I suspect that something like this same dynamic is operating in Philippi between Euodia and Syntyche. Perhaps one of them is a charter member and the other a relative newcomer, coming down on opposite sides of some issue stirred up by rapid church growth. But clearly Paul is more interested in solving disagreement than in describing it.

Solving personality disagreements in the church

What the principal parties should do. So the first thing he does is to indicate what Euodia and Syntyche should do: "agree with each other in the Lord." Notice that this comes in the form of a plea, not a command, and it is a plea offered twice, "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche." Paul is consummately fair with these women. He knows that if he only said "plead" once, the woman named first might take some offense, so he makes sure that both are treated the same.

"To agree with each other" is not necessarily to see the issue identically. The dispute may have been a very legitimate issue that involved a sincere difference of opinion. Paul would not want either one to compromise her convictions. But he does want them to "agree with each other *in the Lord.*" I think the implication is that they must have *spiritual* agreement, agreement in *attitude*, even if they have disagreement in regard to the facts of the case.

What the spiritual leaders should do is also addressed, and this is very important. "Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women." Paul is not averse to mobilizing the resources of the church to solve the dispute. I wish I knew who this unnamed leader was, but we are not told. He was apparently one of Paul's comrades or associates in the work, a man of influence, and probably a man of extraordinary tact.

The point that Paul is making here is that when there is disagreement in the church it is often impossible for the differing parties to work it out on their own—they're too close to the situation, too emotionally involved. So the spiritual leaders should help them by providing a referee, a third party who can listen to both sides and point out the truth on both sides.

I have been involved in arbitration and mediation on several occasions. Sometimes those efforts have been successful, sometimes not. About 15 years ago I was called upon to be on a committee arbitrating a major dispute between two national leaders in the Free Church, a dispute that probably started out as a personality conflict but had grown to involve a number of other issues. That was one of the hardest day's work I have *ever* expended, but the effort was successful. To the credit of both men, the hatchet was buried and they both continued as effective servants for Christ.

In more recent years I have been involved in three mediations with Peacemakers. Two were hugely successful, the third marginally so. I would say to you: Don't hesitate to call upon the resources of the church in solving disputes. We can put together a team of financial experts to solve some dispute over money, a team of Christian lawyers to solve a legal dispute, or a team of businessmen to solve a dispute over an employee or a supplier. It won't always work, but it's sure better than breaking fellowship with another believer or filing a lawsuit against the other person.

Naming names in the church

How many pastors today would have the courage to name a couple of ladies from the pulpit and plead with them to get their act together? Or two men, for that matter? Of course, I notice that even Paul did it in a letter, not in person. And it was probably easier in a small house church than it would be today in a mega-church. But my point is that it takes courage to confront; nevertheless, sometimes it's necessary. Fortunately, I don't have anyone to name today, so relax.

But there's something else about names in verse 3. Having commended Euodia and Syntyche for contending at his side in the cause of the Gospel, Paul similarly commends Clement and "the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life." It was probably an embarrassment for Euodia and Syntyche to have their names in this letter, and it was probably an honor for Clement to have his name mentioned, but there's something far more important than having one's name mentioned in a letter or found on the membership rolls of a church or listed on a plaque in the narthex. It's having your name in the book of life. That's the only place it really counts. Is your name there? You really don't need to wonder about it. The book of life is the

book that God keeps, and names are placed there in indelible ink as individuals put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior.

What lessons do we learn from these two fights over personality and perspective?

Lessons:

- 1. Personal disagreements are inevitable.** Wherever you find two people you will find two opinions and therefore, disagreements.
- 2. Even *godly* people will disagree occasionally.** In fact, they will sometimes strongly disagree, as in this case. Acts 15:39 says there was "sharp" disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. But let me suggest to you that we don't necessarily have to fear disagreements in the church; in fact, I would have greater fear for a church where there were no disagreements, for that would be a sign of uniformity, not unity. (There is such a thing, you know, as the peace of a stagnant pool).
- 3. Sometimes both sides are valid.** As I look at the issue that separated Paul and Barnabas, I believe both had legitimate reasons for the position they took. And that will be true in some of our disagreements. If the issue is one of personality and perspective, it isn't necessary to demonize the other person. It may be far better to recognize the legitimacy of his position but respectfully choose to go in another direction.
- 4. God is able and willing to bring good out of honest disagreement.** The work of missions seems to have been advanced by the separation of Paul and Barnabas. Had they parted as enemies, that probably would never have happened. Ugly church splits bring disrepute to Christ's cause and sometimes disaster to the participants. But when leaders part as friends, albeit disagreeing friends, God's grace can step in and produce progress.

Conclusion: John Wesley and George Whitfield were good friends in their earlier years, Wesley having begun his outdoor preaching ministry at Whitfield's encouragement. As time went on the men disagreed, with Whitfield leaning more heavily toward Calvinism, while Wesley moved toward the Arminian interpretation of theology. In other words, Whitfield stressed the sovereignty of God while Wesley stressed human responsibility and free will. When Whitfield died, Wesley was asked if he expected to see Dr. Whitfield in heaven. In exaggerated but honest respect he answered, "No. He'll be so near the throne of God that men like me will never even get a glimpse of him!" Though differing, they did not lose their sense of oneness in Christ.

Now as we close this morning I want you to think about some conflict you are currently having with another brother or sister in Christ. Ask yourself, is it the kind of issue that you should be breaking fellowship over? Or is it just a different way of looking at something? If you can't work together, can you at least be civil to one another? The issue is how to fight so that the whole church wins.

i. This dialogue is a paraphrase and expansion of a similar one suggested by Leslie B. Flynn in *Great Church Fights*, 39-40.