

SERIES: Great Church Fights
SERMON: **When Pastor and Parishioner Clash**
SCRIPTURE: Gal. 4:12-20
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I'm not sure there's anymore conflict in the average church than in the average business or social organization, but it certainly gets more publicity. When a pastor is fired or a church splits wide open or a church member sues the Elder Board, it usually gets front page coverage. We all know how the news media thrived on the conflict between Jim Bakker and Jerry Falwell, the alleged assault of an airline steward by Robert Schuler, the attempt by the wife of National Baptist President Henry Lyons to burn down their \$750,000 home because of her husband's alleged affair with another woman, the recent divorce of Evangelist Juanita Bynum from Bishop Thomas Weeks, or the recent lawsuit of three members of the ORU faculty against Richard Roberts.

This past Sunday there was a feature article in the New York Times Magazine written by David Kirkpatrick entitled *The Evangelical Crackup*. It talked about the conflicts among evangelicals over values and politics and environmental issues that are expected to dilute the impact of evangelical voters in the next election. Actually much of the article was focused on the church scene right here in Wichita, going all the way back to the Summer of Mercy and continuing through the painful split of Immanuel Baptist Church.

In contrast to such stories I was bragging to a fellow pastor about the level of peace and harmony we have generally enjoyed here at First Free. Then I read an interview with Lynn Buzzard in *Leadership Magazine*. Lynn was executive director of the Christian Legal Society for 15 years. He wrote, "A church with no conflicts is the one suffering from weak pastoral leadership. Either that pastor is failing to inspire anyone enough to care *or* he's repressing conflict, *or*—the most common situation—he's encouraging an avoidance of it."

Well, I don't know whether any or all of those factors are responsible for the lack of open conflict at our church, but I decided to quit bragging about it and just enjoy it. My goal this morning is to share some ideas and principles that hopefully will help us manage conflict in a godly way if and when it ever affects our relationship—that of pastor and people. And that could happen; in fact, it probably will happen. Even if you don't struggle with your sin nature, I do with mine. And I sometimes experience a brain freeze, like a few weeks ago when I was illustrating Euodia and Synteche by referring to a couple of women in our congregation who had a conflict over locking the kitchen 33 years ago. That was an insensitive illustration to use without asking them first. Fortunately both of them were very forgiving.

I take some small comfort in the fact that even the Apostle Paul was no stranger to conflict with his congregations. In the book of Galatians we find him wrestling through a particularly difficult issue with some churches he founded on his first missionary journey. From his base in Antioch Paul was receiving reports that some of his converts were being enticed to abandon him as their "spiritual father," and were now following legalistic teachers who were mixing OT Law with the Gospel of God's grace.

We have already seen how this grace/legalism issue generated a heavyweight bout between Peter and Paul, but it also produced conflict between Paul and his churches. Paul consistently preached in no uncertain terms that salvation is either a gift from God or you have to earn it. You can't have it both

ways—and, of course, he opted for grace. But some of his parishioners preferred to see salvation and sanctification as more of a cooperative effort between God and man. That’s a very common view today, you know: we’re saved by grace plus baptism, plus good works, plus consistent Christian living, etc.

Paul argues with them in chapter 3:2-3, “Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, *or* by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” Then he asks (verse 5), “Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?” In essence Paul’s whole point in Galatians can be stated succinctly: You are saved by believing, not by achieving.

For several chapters Paul speaks to this critical issue as a theologian and defender of the Faith, but beginning in Galatians 4:12 he puts on the hat of the loving pastor.

"I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you. You have done me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?"

Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may be zealous for them. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always and not just when I am with you. My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!"ⁿⁱ This is the Word of the Lord.

How did Paul tackle the problem once he recognized the presence of conflict between himself and his parishioners? Let's see what we can learn from the wisdom and experience of a master, lessons that we may be able to apply at work or school or even at home.

Wise steps toward resolution of conflict between pastor and people.

Affirmation of the other party (12-15). Paul isn't about to let the current conflict blind him to the beautiful relationship he has enjoyed with the Galatians in the past. So four times in four verses he expresses his appreciation for their past kindnesses. There's real wisdom here. If you have to rebuke someone, they're going to be much more willing to listen if you first affirm their strengths or their character.

Let's look at these four affirmations. First, he says at the end of verse 12, "You did me no wrong." He's referring, of course, to the several years he spent ministering to them. They had met his needs, received his message, and obeyed his Gospel. They had not wronged him in any way. His ultimate point, of course, is to draw a contrast between their former behavior and their present attitude.

Secondly, he says in verse 14, "You did not loathe my condition." The Apostle Paul was not a beautiful physical specimen. There are a number of comments in his letters which indicate that he was probably a short, ugly, half-blind Jew with some major physical disability that wasn't exactly socially pleasing.

Here in verse 13 he indicates that it was because of a bodily illness that he preached the Gospel to them in the first place. Scholars have suggested that Paul was possibly an epileptic and that the higher, dryer climate of North Galatia was better for his epilepsy than the humid coastal plain he had been working in. At any rate, there was something in Paul's physical condition that could have caused his parishioners to loathe him and despise him. But they didn't.

Not only did they not loathe him. They actually went to the opposite extreme according to verse 14, where he gives his third affirmation: "You received me as an angel." So great was their respect for Paul, so generous the welcome extended to him, it was as if they were receiving an angel of God. This reminds me of the "honeymoon period" pastors normally experience when they take a new church. But the sad thing to Paul is that the honeymoon is over and the honor once given to him is now being accorded to heretics who are undermining his teaching of grace.

Finally, the Apostle testifies that the Galatians would have done anything for him. Verse 15 reads, "I bear you witness that if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me." Actually, there may be more here than meets the eye, (if you'll pardon the pun). There is considerable evidence that the Apostle Paul suffered from severe eye trouble, perhaps a result of the blinding light he saw in his Damascus Road experience.

One of the hints of this comes from the last chapter of Galatians, where in 6:11 he writes, "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand." Normally he wrote his letters by dictation to a secretary. But, if possible, he would write the final paragraph by himself, although he was forced to write large. If indeed Paul did have an eye disease, his assertion that the Galatians would have plucked out their eyes and given them to him, if possible, demonstrates how much they appreciated him and his ministry.

So we see that in an attempt to resolve the conflict with his former parishioners Paul wisely begins by affirming them for their past relationship and praising their character and behavior. This is such an important lesson to learn. When a husband and wife are in conflict, one of the very best things they can do is to call to mind the strengths each brings to the marriage, the good times they have enjoyed, the rich memories they have accumulated. And this is true of any relationship that develops trouble. It's easy to allow the present conflict to so dominate our thinking that we lose all perspective.

While affirming his friends in every way he can, however, Paul refuses to compromise on the essentials.

Refusal to compromise on essentials (16). The world tells us that the way to resolve conflict is to compromise, and indeed sometimes it is. But not in respect to the essentials of our faith. One of the problems I have with the modern ecumenical movement is that participants seem to be willing to jettison anything that stands in the way of unity—even to the point of abandoning the fundamental truths of Christianity. The other day Phil gave me an article from the Los Angeles Times about a trio of religious leaders—a leading Roman Catholic, a rabbi and a Muslim mullah—who all decided that their Scriptures, from Jesus to Moses to Mohammed, don't really mean what they say. The Rabbi summarized their conclusion:

"People of faith need to say to themselves, 'This is part of my sacred tradition, but I reject it. I

find this text (such as “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”) offensive. It goes against my own morality, and it goes against what I believe God expects of me in the world today.”

Isn't that encouraging?

Though Paul desperately desires to see his former relationship with the Galatians restored, he is not about to compromise his convictions to achieve it. After all, it was his insistence upon the essentials of the Gospel of grace that served as the catalyst for the conflict in the first place. To come back now and say, "Oh, it's not that big a deal after all; legalism is OK; just don't let it get out of hand," would be to compromise the Gospel and to admit that he was wrong when he taught that the Cross of Jesus is the only way to God.

Look at verse 16, where we find Paul asking, "Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?" The Galatians were like so many whose enthusiasm for a Bible teacher wanes as soon as he delves into a subject that offends or convicts them. People like to be selective in their acceptance of truth. But the truth is the truth, and if the truth serves as the catalyst for conflict, so be it. The only restriction God has placed upon speaking truth is that it must be spoken in love. But what a significant restriction! We often use the truth as a club instead of speaking it in love.

The mark of a real friend is that he tells those whom he loves the truth even though it may cost him. Lincoln said to one of his friends before delivering a controversial address, "If it is decreed that I should go down because of this speech, then let me go down linked to the truth." Oh for politicians today with such convictions! And pastors! And parishioners!

Still, Paul is not above clarifying the issues for them to make sure they understand just what is at stake. And that's exactly what he does in verses 17 & 18.

Clarification of the issues (17, 18). Let me paraphrase these two verses for you: "Those heretical teachers go to great lengths to flatter you, but their motives are rotten (it is for *their* good, not yours). They want to shut you out of the free world of God's grace so that you will always depend on them for approval and direction, making them feel important. Now it's a great thing to win others as disciples, whether I'm there or not, provided that it is for the truth." (Mostly *The Message*).

There are a lot of funny things going on in the church today under the name of church growth that don't seem to have very much to do with truth. Religious leaders with great charisma are accruing to themselves followers with unswerving loyalty, but for whose good?

One Sunday I left church about 12:30. My car radio was tuned to a Christian station, and there was a church service in progress. I recognized the pastor's voice as he's on radio and TV a lot, and I decided to listen to his sermon. He was a very good communicator. There were great illustrations, excellent humor, and lots of feedback from the audience. But you know something? I listened to him preach for 25 minutes and there was not one mention of Scripture. Not one verse! He talked about how our culture is going down hill, how the entertainment industry is wallowing in the gutter, how marriage is in decline—all true! But nothing from the Scripture.

I would like to assume this was an unusual Sunday at that church. But I fear that in many churches it is the norm. Occasionally I catch another preacher on TV who preaches regularly to 30,000 people.

That's like preaching to a packed crowd at an NBA game; in fact, his church *is* a former NBA stadium! He is an excellent communicator, hardly ever looking at his notes; the words just flow; he's so positive and encouraging. But once again, when you look for the biblical foundation of his message, when you look for the Gospel core, you generally look in vain.

Paul urged the young pastor Timothy, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:2-3).

The final step Paul takes in his effort to resolve the conflict with his parishioners is to express his love for them.

Expression of unconditional love (19-20). To these same individuals who are giving him so much grief, Paul says, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!" Notice that Paul has come full circle in his effort to resolve the conflict with his parishioners. He started with affirmations of them. Then, while he refused to compromise the truth, he did seek to clarify the issues to make sure they understand his position. Now he concludes with warm expressions of his love for them.

People need to know they are loved; they need to be encouraged; they need to be affirmed. A Pastor must be a shepherd as well as a teacher. Paul knew how to rebuke and he knew how to encourage. There's quite a different tone here in verse 19 than what we find back in 3:1. There Paul began, "You dear idiots of Galatia (that's the literal translation) . . ." Now it's "My children . . ." In 3:1 he is provocative and argumentative, trying to get their attention and shake them out of their spiritual doldrums. But now he places infinite value upon them, just as a mother does upon her children. You see, Paul was their spiritual parent. He was the one who labored to bring them the knowledge of Christ, which eventually resulted in a new birth for them. But a miscarriage had occurred along the way, and now he is in labor all over again "until Christ is formed in you," or, as one paraphrase expresses it, "until you take the shape of Christ."

Now let me tell you something: you can follow all four of these steps Paul uses in the Galatian letter and still not resolve the conflict. These are not foolproof, guaranteed cure-alls. Conflict involves at least two people and you can only control one—yourself. But the prospects for peace are much better when you affirm the other party refuse to compromise on essentials, clarify the issues, and then express unconditional love.

Now there's a separate but related point I would like to make this morning:

The purpose of conflict in the church (1 Cor. 11:19)

Much conflict in the Church is sinful and appears to us to serve no purpose other than the Satanic one of undermining the cause of Christ. However, even in such cases it is possible for God to produce positive

results. Turn with me to 1 Cor. 11:18-19, a passage dealing with irregularities at the Lord's Supper: "I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions (conflict) among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there *have* to be differences (conflicts) among you to show which of you have God's approval."

Conflict in the church serves to reveal who has God's approval. In other words, often through how they handle conflict God reveals to the church who the wise, discerning, spiritual leaders are, as opposed to the proud, the power-hungry, or the emotional hotheads. I remember when I first went to St. Louis the church there had chosen five elders to lead them. Conflict began to develop also immediately, as one of the elders wanted strong Elder rule—lifetime elders making only unanimous decisions, etc. He had a my-way-or-the-highway kind of attitude.

About a year into my ministry a particular Elder decision went against this man's desires, and he slammed his notebook down on the table, got beet-red, and told the rest of us what we could do with our decision. Because of that and other similar outbursts, it became obvious that this elder did not have the biblical qualifications of an elder (like "self-controlled, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome," 1 Tim 3:2-3), and he was asked to resign. The conflict revealed his character. One writer put it this way: "The divine chemistry in the church discloses that which is tested and genuine, as opposed to that which is alloyed and adulterated."

When conflict continually surrounds certain people it is probably an indication that there is something fundamentally wrong with their character, or their attitudes, or their communication style, or their priorities. I can't help but think of a Christian scholar whom many of you would know if I mentioned his name. I know him well, having team-taught a course with him at Miami Christian College years ago. He is a very bright man, an accomplished author, and president of a seminary. But wherever he goes there is conflict. When he taught at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School there was conflict, he stirred up conflict when he was on the faculty of Dallas, he led a revolt in the Evangelical Theological Society against another theologian, and he created the biggest conflict ever in our denomination during the time he was credentialed with us. His name is simply synonymous with conflict. I suggest to you that such a reputation reveals a character flaw.

It would probably be wise for each of us to pause right now and ask ourselves the question, "Am I experiencing an unusual amount of conflict in my life, and if so, am I personally responsible for that? Could I be demonstrating God's lack of approval of the way I am conducting myself?"

It also demonstrates that something important is going on. Conflict gets us out of our lethargy and forces us to identify what is important to us. Saul Alinsky (not a noted theologian, I admit) has a line that intrigues me: "Change means movement, and movement means friction, and friction means heat, and heat means conflict. You just can't get the rocket off the ground discreetly and quietly." My goal today is certainly not to encourage conflict between pastor and people. Nevertheless we need to recognize that its presence often indicates that we feel deeply about what is going on. That's good, and if we can channel those strong feelings into productive work, we'll all be better off.

Most importantly we should make sure that any conflict for which *we* serve as a catalyst is over essential matters and that we do our best to resolve it in a biblical way.

Conclusion: I want to say a summary word about a congregation's attitude toward its pastors and vice versa. We should take a cue from this passage that we are not to judge our spiritual leaders by outward appearance. They may be intelligent or average, eloquent or dull, handsome or homely extrovert or introvert. These are not the really important things. We should neither flatter pastors because they are unusually gifted nor despise them if they are not.

We should not assess their worth according to our favorite teachings. Our attitude toward a spiritual leader should be determined preeminently by his fidelity to the letter and spirit of God's Word and his desire to bring believers to maturity in Christ.

And what about the pastor's attitude to the people? John Calvin wrote, "If ministers wish to do any good, let them labor to form Christ, not to form themselves, in their hearers." And how is Christ formed in people? Well, first they must be brought to faith in Jesus, acknowledging their sin and putting their trust in the death of Christ for the forgiveness of sin. Then they must learn to be obedient to the commandments of Christ and to walk with Him on a daily basis.

Only when pastor and people thus keep their eyes on Christ will damaging conflict be avoided and the work of Christ's church succeed.

Now I have decided to do one more message in this series: *Are We Willing to Become a Peacemaking Church?* What does a church look like when it decides it will try to develop a culture of peacemaking. Next week I will try to share my heart with you on that important topic. Let's pray.
