

22. Church contentions

January 5, 2014

When you were a kid, did you ever bicker with your siblings? Who hasn't?! If you have a dysfunctional family like many of us do, you may still bicker with your siblings.

As long as there are humans, there are bound to be bickers, arguments, and contentions. It can be between husband and wife, parents and kids, siblings, relatives, friends, coworkers, and neighbors, or even with someone whom you don't even know. That is how fights break out, crimes and riots, and even wars happen.

Some Christians think that the First Century Jerusalem church was a model church without any blemish or struggle. If that is you, you are dreaming. Acts chapter 15 will blow that Christian bubble right out of your naive imagination.

We not only find the legalists who were causing contentions within the ranks and files of the First Century church as well as apostle Paul and Barnabas themselves arguing so much that they ended up splitting up. It was something you would see on some cheezy tabloid covers.

It is extremely rare for a church not to go through contentions or splits. The majority of church contentions or splits were not caused by doctrinal problems, rather personal preference differences.

Let's learn what the Lord has for us from the contentious situations that we are about to witness this morning. Because we can apply the same principles and solutions in our relationship with anyone we come across.

A. CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH

Acts 15:1-5 And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. 4 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

The church of Antioch in Syria was filled with excitement and exuberance from the report of Paul and Barnabas. If we were there, we would have as well. Then, just like what Satan would do, the legalists from the Jerusalem church sneaked into the ranks and taught that the Gentiles, in order to be really saved, had to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses.

These people may have come from the Jerusalem church, but they were not authorized messengers from the church leaders like James, Peter, and other apostles. These people were from the Pharisees and they still had legalistic baggage from their previous beliefs and expected that others to follow. In other words, they really did not understand the true meaning of salvation through Jesus Christ only. They wanted to rob both Jewish and Gentile believers of their liberty in Christ.

We may think, "How can they not accept the grace of God in its face value?" It is easy for us to think that way, because we know far more than the First Century church congregation since we have the entire Bible. After all, the Book of Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews had not been written, and they were living right smack dab in the middle of the Book of Acts itself.

There was a large group of priests in the Jerusalem church congregation, as well as people who still followed some of the OT practices. It was a time of transition, and such times are always difficult.

In case you are wondering what these legalists were doing and why they were so dangerous, please allow me to explain quickly. They were attempting to mix law and grace and to pour the new wine into the old brittle wineskins as Jesus mentioned in Luke chapter 5. They were rebuilding the separating wall between Jews and Gentiles that Jesus had torn down on the cross and putting the heavy Jewish yokes on Gentiles. That is not what the Lord wanted.

This is exactly what apostle Paul taught us against in Galatians:

Galatians 1:8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.

We are wholly saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, plus nothing, nada, zip, zilch. If we try to add anything upon this, we are in danger of being accursed by the wrath of God.

This was not a side matter that Paul and Barnabas could push aside and deal with it when they had spare time. This was the core doctrine of Christianity and this had to be nipped in the bud. That's why the church sent Paul and Barnabas to the Jerusalem church.

B. AT THE JERUSALEM CHURCH

Acts 15:6-21 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. 7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, 9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. 10 Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? 11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they." 12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. 13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me: 14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 16 'After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; 17 So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the Lord who does all these things.' 18 "Known to God from eternity are all His works. 19 Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, 20 but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual

immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. 21 For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

This portion can be divided into the three segments:

Peter reviewed God's ministries to the Gentiles in the past, and Paul and Barnabas reported on God's work among the Gentiles in that present day. James was the final speaker and he focused on the future.

Apostle Peter talked about not putting a yoke of the OT law on the necks of the Gentile believers by demanding them to have circumcision and obeying the Law of Moses. He was talking about having relationship with the Lord, not religion.

Religion is a funny thing. It makes people feel good about themselves. Because it is made by humans to approach God. It makes humans be prideful for one's own accomplishment through one's religion. Humans want a religion in one's own terms to appease one's own selfish spirituality. However, it has one major drawback. It still leaves vast emptiness in one's heart no matter what humans do.

Doug Pagitt, an Emergent Movement teacher who is, in my opinion, a devil's henchman, said this:

"I want a Christianity I can believe in, you know, one without the exclusivity of Christ, the kind where my feelings can rule my faith, you know, universalism."

What a damnable theology! The desire of most people is for a religion that is convenient, not too costly, and close enough to the real Christian faith to be comfortable for the conscience. We live today in an age when "People's Choice religion" is popular, approved and accepted.

When Paul and Barnabas reported what happened during their missionary journey, the congregation including the legalists was silent. They couldn't argue with what God was doing through Paul and Barnabas.

A half-brother of Jesus, James concluded the meeting by quoting Amos 9:11-12. It points out to the Jews that salvation will come to the Gentiles and what God did among them had a biblical foundation.

C. THE DECREE FROM THE JERUSALEM CHURCH

Acts 15:22-29 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. 23 They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law"--to whom we gave no such commandment-- 25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

The leaders and the whole church, directed by the Holy Spirit, made a twofold decision: a doctrinal decision about salvation, and a practical decision about how to live the Christian life.

It is not enough for us simply to accept a biblical truth; we must apply it personally in everyday life. Church problems are not solved by passing resolutions, but by practicing the revelations God gives us from His Word. That is the reason why I end every teaching of mine with applications for our lives. I don't do that so that you guys can start to gather up your belongings to mad dash out to Denny's or Pizza Hut.

We today can learn a great deal from this difficult experience of the early church. To begin with, problems and differences are opportunities for growth just as much as temptations for dissension and division. We need to work together and take time to listen, love, and learn. How many hurtful comments, fights, and splits could have been avoided if only some of God's people had given the Spirit time to speak and to work.

Christians need to learn the art of loving compromise. I am talking about compromise in non-essential matters. I am not uptight on many non-essential doctrines, such as, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the eternal security of salvation, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, etc. I know that these doctrines would make some people really hot under their collar one way or another. But I am not, because I know that the devil uses these to split the church very effectively and I am not about to fall into his trick.

But when it comes to the core doctrines of Christianity, I am willing to die on that hill. They are: the Deity of Jesus Christ, Salvation by grace, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, One God in three Persons (Trinity), the exclusiveness of salvation through Jesus Christ, Jesus' Virgin Birth, etc. I don't care if you don't agree with the God's truth, it only proves that you are wrong.

D. DIVISION OVER JOHN MARK

Acts 15:30-41 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. 32 Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words. 33 And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles. 34 However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. 35 Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. 36 Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing." 37 Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. 39 Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

I am so glad that the Bible is no longer recorded. I don't want all the stupid things that I've said and done recorded as bad examples not to follow. This was not the finest moment of Paul and Barnabas, rather the worst. Right after the great success that defused the church contention, these two godly men duked out over John Mark whether they should take him to their second missionary journey or not.

Who was right? It really doesn't make much difference. Perhaps both men were right on some things and wrong on other things. We know that John Mark ultimately did succeed in the ministry and that Paul came to love and appreciate him.

In spite of their disagreement and less than desirable results, the Lord was able to overrule their silliness and accomplish His purpose. God changes His workmen, but His work goes right on.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) Our limitations and imperfections are good reasons for us to depend on the grace of God, because our sufficiency is from Him alone.

2) When in a disagreement, work hard to see the other point of view . It begins with listening that must be accompanied by honesty, objectivity, and humility.

3) When both sides have validity, seek a wise compromise.

Pastor Chuck Smith used to teach us, "Blessed are flexible, for they shall not be broken."

4) When the conflict persists, care enough to work it through rather than walk out. Remember, outburst of anger should have no place in Christian life.

5) When it comes to the core doctrines of Christianity, DO NOT compromise for anything or anyone in the world.

The great reformer Martin Luther said this: "In essentials unity. In non-essentials liberty. In all things charity."