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In Praise of Conflict

Text: Acts 15:1-21

If I were to stand before you on a Sunday and poll the congregation, asking “How many of you have been baptized?” You would not be alarmed. If, however, I said “If you've not been baptized, you cannot be saved”, you would accuse me of heresy. If I declared that unless you were baptized you could not participate in our communion service, you would, rightly, accuse me of heresy. A similar scenario is described here in Acts 15. There were itinerant teachers that traveled from Judea to Antioch who insisted that if people weren’t circumcised, they couldn’t be justified. Maybe they were basing their teaching on Genesis17:14 or Exodus 12:48-49. Men teaching the same heresy are referenced in Galatians 2:12. Maybe it was the same band of traveling heretics.

When Paul and Barnabas, church leaders, heard this teaching, the hair must have stood up on the backs of their necks. Paul and Barnabas knew false teaching when they heard it. Let me pause here and advocate for readers and leaders in the Church who are so theologically and biblically informed that they know when something is not right.

I applaud the early church. They sent Paul and Barnabas and a small delegation to Jerusalem, to discuss the question. This was not a light matter. This was a teaching that could confuse people who were trying to embrace Christ as Savior. Some beliefs and practices are minor and almost inconsequential. Should an offering be received by passing the plate or should congregants walk up to offering plates? Should a choir be in a loft, behind the worshippers or in a choir loft/ choir stand behind the preacher? Should communion be served used wafers or bread? Wine or grape juice? These are questions to be considered but they are not deal breakers. However, this teaching by the traveling heretics had to do with a person’s salvation. Verse 2 describes it as “no small dissension”. Verse 7 speaks of “much dispute”. That word could also be translated *disagreement, argument, inquiry, debate.* It would be easy to think these guys are overreacting. However, something very significant is at stake here. Paul and Barnabas are not obsessed with disputes like those people referred to in 1 Timothy 6:4 (“he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, “) and 2 Timothy 2:23 (**“**But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife.”) and Titus 3:9 (“But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless.“)

No, Paul and Barnabas are not engaged in recreational theological debate. They are aiming to protect the doctrinal purity of the first century church. What believers believe is important. Sometimes I hear people quote clichés, repeat clichés they have heard, and I think to myself, “Do you *really* believe that?” I hear people say, “I decree and declare that I shall not have cancer. The Bible says, ‘by His stripes we are healed.’ ” Paul and Barnabas would have taken on such a comment. They would have discussed and debated it. On their way to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas and their delegation described the conversion of the Gentiles in places where they stopped (Phoenicia and Samaria). When they got to Jerusalem, they discussed the matter with the church leaders there. One legalistic person, a Pharisee, repeated the heretical teaching which Paul and Barnabas had heard in Antioch (v.5).

There is a part of most of us that says, “Let sleeping dogs lie. Don’t stir up a ruckus over doctrine.” Some would say, “Don’t start anything and there won’t be anything”. Actually, the phrase is “Don’t start nothing...won’t be nothing”, but I can’t bring myself to rattle off the double negatives. :-)

Priya Parker is a gathering guru and a conflict resolution facilitator. In her book, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters,* she titles one of her chapters, Cause Good Controversy. Priya Parker suggests that when we gather, we don’t squander the time. She suggests that we deliberately stir something up.

In this text, there’s a large elephant in the room and Peter is not about to act like it isn’t there!

Peter says

1. The path to salvation is the same for Jew and Gentile (v.7-9)
2. The legalistic insistence on circumcision is analogous to putting a yoke on new disciples (v.10). When Jesus was on the earth, He pointed out this same hypocrisy (Matthew 23:1-4). These legalists were laying burdens on others that they themselves were not willing, or able, to bear.

Paul and Barnabas and Peter are so committed to theological integrity that they open up the conflict. There’s a place for that.

After Paul and Barnabas paused, James spoke up. James, like Paul and Barnabas, wants to streamline and simplify the prevailing understanding of the faith, so that Gentiles aren’t unnecessarily burdened (v. 19). James says there should be basic guidelines (20,29), which the council of apostles and elders calls “necessary things” (v. 28). When discussing our ministries and the execution and implementation of programs, let’s

keep the focus right. Let’s keep the main thing, the main thing.

The benefit of good controversy and appropriate conflict is that those who are out of line, socially, or ethically, or professionally or theologically are brought into line. Isn’t that what we want?

Sherrie Campbell wrote an article that appeared on the web site [entrepreneur.com](http://entrepreneur.com), titled, The 10 Benefits of Conflict. In that article she suggests that conflict

1. Opens our eyes to new ideas

2. Provides opportunity to verbalize needs

3. Teaches flexibility

4. Teaches us to listen

5. Teaches us patterns of behavior

6. Leads to solutions

7. Leads us to practice communication skills

8. Helps us to set limits

9. Leads us to practice emotional control

10. Allows us to differentiate ourselves

Ultimately, good conflict is orthopedic. It straightens out the crooked components and heals the fractured pieces of an organization or a ministry.

**Illus.**

Two men who lived in a small village got into a terrible conflict that they could not resolve. So, they decided to talk to the town sage. The first man went to the sage's home and told his version of what happened. When he finished, the sage said, "You're absolutely right." The next night, the second man called on the sage and told his side of the story. The sage responded, "You're absolutely right." Afterward, the sage's wife scolded her husband. "Those men told you two different stories and you told them they were absolutely right. That's impossible -- they can't both be absolutely right." The sage turned to his wife and said, "You're absolutely right."

You think conflict is good. You think good conflict is even better.

You're absolutely right.

Amen