

CONFLICTS IN CHRISTIAN WORK

Acts fifteen & Galatians chapter two.

INTRODUCTION.

Some principles we need to observe in order to handle in a godly manner -- or, if possible, avoid -- conflict with our **brethren** (conflict with **Satan** and his hosts we cannot and must not try to avoid -- Eph. 6:11, 12; 2 Tim. 2:3, 4; 4:7-a).

We must seek unity in two areas of our Christian experience:

"Unity of the **Spirit**" -- we cannot **establish** this unity, it is already firmly established by **GOD**. We must **keep** it (recognize it and make it the basis for our thinking and our actions). Eph. 4:3 with the context.

"Unity of the **faith**" -- we **can** help to establish this unity by "speaking the truth in love." Eph. 4:13, 15.

We need to walk in the Spirit. Gal. 5:13 - 26.

We must have "the mind of Christ." See Philippians chapter two.

Yet conflicts do come! Three important conflicts are found in Acts fifteen, when considered in light of Galatians two. **What can we learn from them?**

Conflict over DOCTRINE -- Paul and the Judaizers. (Acts 15:1 - 32 with Gal. 2:1 - 10).

1. This was over **vital** doctrine! It had to do with what is necessary to **salvation** (Acts 15:1; Gal. 2:5). We must be careful not to make a big issue of minute points of doctrine. For example, to see that the Body of Christ began at mid-Acts is of vital importance, for the Acts two view would involve us with some aspects of the kingdom program, and the Acts twenty eight view would rob us of over half of Paul's writings. But whether it happened at Acts nine, eleven or thirteen is not vital. This exact timing is, of course, interesting and valuable, but not important enough to divide believers!

2. Paul looked to the Lord for guidance as to the advisability of such a general meeting (Gal. 2:2-a). Paul received his guidance by direct revelation. With us it will be by searching the Scriptures, searching our hearts, and looking to the Lord in prayer for the leading of the Spirit. Most doctrinal issues can best be met by "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15); personal and private instruction, as Priscilla and Aquila dealt with Apollos (Acts 18:24 - 28); or lovingly and humbly "forbearing one another in love" (Eph. 4:2), remembering that no two teachers fully agree on everything. **No man has all, and nothing but, the truth.**

3. It began on a positive note -- testimony as to what God had been doing (Acts 15:3, 4). Teach the truth strongly and clearly, demonstrating how it affects the work of the Lord for good. Let those teaching error be the ones to "start the argument" (Acts 15:5).

4. The leaders ("which were of reputation") were first consulted privately to resolve side issues, and make sure the truth was **really understood**, before the public meeting (Gal. 2:2 - 9).

5. The truth of a doctrine is not to be established by the vote of those attending such a meeting. Paul **did not** go to Jerusalem to find out if he was preaching the right message or not (Gal. 1:11, 12, 16). His intention was to do all he could to silence the objectors -- so his work would not be "in vain" due to their opposition. He had enough trouble with the Judaizers as he continued his work: what would it have been if the Apostles themselves had opposed him?

6. Mutual understanding of each other's position is to be sought. The twelve set forth

their message, and Paul already fully understood it (Gal. 2:6). But when Paul set before the Twelve what God is doing during this Age of Grace, and the gospel of grace, the message was new to them. By the **Spirit** (Eph. 3:5) they were enabled to understand, and accept, what Paul had received by **revelation** (Eph. 3:3). See also 2 Pet. 3:15, 16.

7. The things **agreed on** were made known clearly and put in writing for accuracy and permanence (Acts 15:23 - 29). They were also carefully explained by those who **knew** the facts of the meeting (Acts 15:31, 32).

8. All that could be done honestly and conscientiously to soften the decision was done (Acts 15:28, 29; Gal. 2:10).

9. The meeting did **not** put an **end** to the problem. The Judaizers continued to oppose Paul and his gospel as long as he lived. They are with us even today. But it did keep them from using godly but uninformed men to accomplish their ends (Acts 15:24 and following).

Conflict over WALK, the APPLICATION of Doctrine -- Paul & Peter (Gal. 2:11 - 21).

1. Notice the background and timing of this conflict. Peter **knew** the doctrine involved. He knew he was free to eat with Gentiles (Acts 10:15; 11:3, 18) and he knew about the Age of Grace, and Paul's God-given message and commission (Gal. 2:7 - 9). It was after the delivery of the letter from James to the church in Antioch. Peter was probably one of the "many others" of Acts 15:35. It was before the dispute between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36 - 41), for Barnabas was still in Antioch at the time (Gal. 2:13). He could not plead ignorance.

2. This was not a doctrinal problem. Peter understood and had already agreed with Paul's message to the Gentiles (Acts 15:9 - 11).

3. Peter was just not acting in keeping with the doctrine he believed (Gal. 2:14).

4. Paul faced Peter with the problem. He did not talk about him behind his back (Gal. 2:11).

5. As far as the record shows, Peter did not try to answer him and defend himself.

6. Paul stood against Peter **publicly** for some very good reasons. First of all, this was a very important issue (Gal. 2:21) and Peter was to be blamed. He knew he was wrong (Gal. 2:11, 18) and he was acting out of **fear** (Gal. 2:12). Also Peter had done this **publicly**, influencing others by his actions (Gal. 2:13), and so must be answered publicly.

7. Paul was very careful to explain **why** Peter was wrong. The whole passage, (Gal. 2:14-b - 21) is Paul's answer to Peter's hypocrisy.

8. Paul handled this matter in such a way that he did not **unnecessarily** offend Peter. There was no name calling, remembering of past offenses (his denial of Christ for instance), no long tirade, nor even a direct **accusation**. He just asked Peter a question and gave his reason for asking it. In Galatians two he referred to Peter's fear and hypocrisy, but **he did not call him a coward** or a **hypocrite!** (Peter was, no doubt, hurt deeply, but he did not lose his respect or his **love** for Paul -- over a long period of time. See 2 Pet. 3:15, 16).

9. Paul never brought this matter up again except here in Galatians two, where it is necessary in his defense of the gospel of grace. This problem was evidently handled so well that Luke saw no reason to mention it in Acts, even though Paul's rebuke of Peter was a rebuke to Barnabas as well (Gal. 2:13). In itself, it did not cause a break between Paul and Barnabas. Their parting was later and over another issue.

Conflict over METHODS and PERSONALITIES -- Paul & Barnabas (Acts 15:36 - 40).

This was not a conflict over doctrine, but it was a "sharp" argument, a hot debate (Acts 15:39). It could not be resolved, for they parted company, each going his own way. **Why** do we have this conflict between two such spiritual and dynamic Christian leaders? Even spiritual and missionary-minded men of God do not always see alike in areas where specific Scripture is not available to solve the problem. Both men had good arguments for their views, and felt their course of action concerning John Mark was justified by Scriptural principles.

When Mark accompanied them on their first missionary journey he went along as their helper (Acts 13:5). After the encounter with the opposition of the Jew, Bar-Jesus, a false prophet and a sorcerer, he left the missionary party and returned home (Acts 13:13). We are not told why he left them. It may have been fear, homesickness, an unwillingness to suffer hardships, or some other reason or combination of reasons, but Paul felt he had failed, that he was a "quitter" and could not be trusted to accompany them again (Acts 15:38). Paul saw the importance of faithfulness and commitment to God's service and servants. He feared Mark would do the same thing again, and set a bad example for others.

Barnabas had a personal attachment to Mark, for he was his uncle (Col. 4:10). He probably felt that a young man should not be set aside for only one failure -- that he would become discouraged and be lost to the ministry, etc. While Paul was a very strong personality and likely to expect of others the same unrelenting commitment he displayed, Barnabas was evidently more of a peacemaker (his very name means "Son of encouragement"). He was the one who had taken up for Paul when the rest of the believers rejected his testimony and feared him (Acts 9:26, 27).

We also, at times, face situations where Scripture does not tell us specifically just what we should do, and even the "leading of the Lord" may be understood differently by those involved. Even spiritual believers still have the fleshly nature, for none have fully arrived at absolute maturity (Phil. 3:12 - 14). So, as we study this incident in Paul's life, **what good came from it?** One outstanding result of this hot interchange was the reclamation of Mark for the ministry. He needed the stern rebuke of Paul lest he never learn to stick to a job. But he also needed the encouragement of Barnabas lest he drop out of the work of the Lord altogether. He lived to write the second Gospel, and proved himself even to Paul (Col. 4:10; Philemon 24; 2 Tim. 4:11).

Because they parted ways there were now two missionary parties instead of one (Acts. 15:39, 40). They did not waste time fighting with each other, but each went his own way carrying the gospel to lost men.

Influenced by Peter's example, Barnabas had shown a weakness in regard to the legalism of James (Gal. 2:13) and now, as Paul goes out to his greatest battles with the legalizers in the churches (see Galatians), he needs a stronger man by his side! With Silas (Silvanus) taking the place of Barnabas, he seems to have found such a man.

What can we learn from this conflict?

1. We can learn that conflict **DOES COME!** Often the greatest problem faced by missionaries, even spiritual ones, is getting along with other missionaries. Happy, indeed, the pastor who does not have conflict with his members, his Board and even other pastors.

2. As with Paul and Barnabas, Satan and the flesh seem to promote conflicts (and God allows them to come) just when God is beginning to do a great work. These three conflicts related in Acts fifteen and Galatians two came just before the extensive outreach covered in the rest of the book of Acts -- when Paul and his company were able to "turn the world upside down" for the Lord (Acts 17:6).

3. How helpful it is to know it is not so much the **presence** of conflict which indicates a man's spiritual condition, but **HOW HE HANDLES IT!**

4. We need to see from this Scripture that not all men (or women -- see Phil. 4:2, 3) can work together, even if they are both spiritual Christians.

5. Even separation due to conflict should not rob us of our respect and love for one another (1 Cor. 9:6).

6. Barnabas did not try to "take over" the churches established on the first missionary journey, or warn the believers against Paul, or in any way disrupt his work. Paul had a lot of trouble with the legalists, but not with Barnabas! Evidently the church decided which one would carry on the work and which should "resign" (Acts 15:40, 41). It was a very good decision. It was Barnabas who had begun the work in Antioch (Acts 11:22 - 24). Paul who was called in to **help** (Acts 11:25, 26). However Paul was the one who had already been called (at his conversion) to be the Apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 26:16 - 18), and who had taken the place of leadership on the first missionary journey (Acts 14:12).

7. No bitterness followed the incident. Evidently the men kept to the point of the difference and did not: make accusations; question one another's salvation, dedication or motives; say things in a **cutting way**; cherish an unforgiving spirit; hold grudges; etc.

8. They did not try to make a **doctrinal** issue of it, or bring doctrinal matters into the discussion.

9. Neither one of them took the dispute before those outside the Antioch assembly to try to get them to "take their side" in the argument. It was settled between them and not brought before the other churches to cause trouble in the Body of Christ.

There are other illustrations of conflict, both good and bad, in Scripture. Each can be very instructive. The important thing is that we **HEED** the lessons we learn!

"Now all these things happened unto them for examples, and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come" (1 Cor. 10:11).

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PRINCIPLES illustrated in Philippians which can help solve problems between believers.

1. The letter itself is a masterpiece of loving **tact**. Paul does not accuse, scold, lecture or use harsh words -- it is a book filled with blessing coming from a loving and rejoicing heart. He doesn't even mention the specific issues which were dividing Euodia and Syntyche.

2. We should not try to judge other's **motives**. "Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife ... [they] preach Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure **motives**. ... what then? ... whether in pretense or in truth, **Christ is preached**; and in this **I rejoice!**" (1:15 - 18 - NASB).

3. We need to be of "**one mind**," standing firm in "**one spirit**" ... maintaining the "**same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose**" (2:2). If both have the Mind of **Christ** -- then they have **one mind!** (Neither Euodia nor Syntyche had to "give in" to the other -- they just had to **both** "give in" to **Christ**.)

- This results in fulfilling the exhortations of 2:3, 4.
- It springs from having "the Mind of Christ" (2:5 & following).
- God will reward this "mind" -- as He did in Christ (2:9 - 11).

-- God will work in you to make it possible (2:12, 13). This is the practical result of being members in one Body (Eph. 4:3 & following).

4. Remember our testimony before the world. They are watching what we do and **how we do it!** (2:14 - 16). If we are murmuring (toward God) and disputing with our brethren, we cannot effectively "shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life."

5. Seek the interests of **others** (2:4) and of **Christ** (2:20 - 22) -- not our **own!** Paul (1:23, 24), Timothy (2:19 - 22), and Epaphroditus (2:25 - 30), are examples of this principle.

6. Put **no confidence** in the **flesh** (3:3 - 9)! Compare these fleshly characteristics (the "religious" flesh) with those in Gal. 5:19 - 21 (the "filthy," obviously evil, flesh).

7. Don't dwell on the past (either our own past or that of others -- good or bad), but look to the future with hope and expectation (3:13, 14).

8. Don't question the salvation of people just because you have a misunderstanding with them (4:2, 3) -- "- whose names **are** in the book of life."

9. Let your "sweet reasonableness" be known to all men (4:5 - Wuest). *The exhortation is (according to Wuest) "Do not just keep this sweet reasonableness in your heart, let it find expression in your **conduct** also. Thus others will experience its blessings also."*

10. Be full of cares about nothing -- but full of prayers about everything. You will have **His** peace (4:6, 7).

11. Fill your mind with recollections of the good points of your brother or sister (4:8). When we are angry with our brother we should pause to reflect on his good points -- it will put the present problem in perspective. "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true [**about your brother**], whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are of good report [**about him**], if there be any virtue [**in him**], and if there be any praise [**for him**], think on **these** things." The preceding context indicates this as the primary application of this verse.

12. Don't fail to be on speaking terms with **every** saint! (4:21, 22)

13. Not all of the principles to accomplish this task are found in Philippians. Continue to study the whole word of God, specially Paul's epistles, for other truths which may be applied to heal divisions between believers.

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