

Paul in Conflict

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Acts 15:36-41

During this sermon series, we've looked at some exciting and beautiful parts of the church. Movements of God's people that lift our spirits and make us hopeful. Peter preaching to the crowds at Pentecost. Paul boldly confronting Agrippa and Festus. The close, koinonia fellowship of the early church. Uplifting stuff. Today we will deal with less inspirational material. Today we reflect on conflict in the church. That's a subject we Reformed Christians in the Grand Rapids know something about. 160 years ago there was only one Reformed church in the Grand Rapids area. Today there are at least eight. The Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed, the United Reformed, the Free Reformed, the Heritage Reformed, The Reformed Presbyterian, the Netherlands Reformed, and the Protestant Reformed. That's just the Grand Rapids area. When God called people to be fruitful and multiply, I don't think that's what he meant.

As we move into the future, there may be more trouble ahead. There are always schismatic pressures on the church. Those pressures are as strong as they've ever been. Ministers and churches they serve are butting heads with each other and these conflicts are leading to separations. Ministers quit, or get fired. At a denominational level issues like partisan politics, the pandemic, and LGBTQ are threatening to turn the 8 local reformed denominations into 9, or 10 or who knows how many. As a church leader, I worry a lot about unity, and I know you all do too.

It's not a new problem. Right from the beginning God's people fought, and slammed their fists on tables and went their separate ways. It happened to Paul and Barnabas. Let's read Acts 15.36-41.

"Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company." The news must have dropped like a bomb in the middle of the young church. Paul and Barnabas are splitting up?! Paul and Barnabas aren't speaking?! How can this be? What happened? It all started with John Mark, Barnabas' cousin. On Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey, Mark wanted to come along. He was young, but he was eager and he promised to be useful. "Cousin Barnabas, I'm totally ready for this! Please let me come!" So they took him along. They started in Cyprus. They travelled throughout the island telling people about Jesus. They worked hard. But Mark started to get homesick. The days were long and tense, the sleeping arrangements weren't great. They were never sure where their next meal was coming from. It wore him down. And so when the team arrived in Pamphylia, Mark bailed. He went home to his Mom and a warm bed.

Now the time had come for a second missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas were going to revisit some of the churches they'd started, and then they planned to venture into new territory. While they were putting their missionary team together, Barnabas came to Paul and said, "Hey Paul let's take my cousin Mark. Let's give him another chance." Paul's answer was some version of, "Absolutely not. Out of the question." "Come on Paul! He's only a kid! Give him another chance!" "No way, I am not going to babysit that mama's boy. We could have used him on that trip. Lystra, Barnabas! Do you remember Lystra! They just about killed me there! I could have used his help that day. I was lying half dead in a ditch and he was at home eating muffins with his mommy!" "Come on Paul! He said sorry and he wants another chance.

Honestly, you can be so stubborn sometimes.” “And honestly Barnabas, you can be such a bleeding heart!” It got worse from there. The dispute becomes a schism. Barnabas takes Mark to Cyprus. Paul takes Silas to Syria.

Now I’m sure that like most disputes there was blame on both sides. I’m sure Paul and Barnabas both had responsibility for this falling out. But because I know Paul’s story, because we have access to so much more of Paul’s life and his writings, I want to look at Paul’s side of the conflict. As we think about conflict in the church, let’s examine Paul’s behavior in this conflict, let’s look at his behavior in light of the rest of his life and writing and let’s see what we might learn as we approach our conflicted times.

Let me begin by saying, if I were Paul’s friend, I would have some questions about his behavior in this passage. If I were Paul’s friend, I’d have three pointed questions for him. First I would say, “Paul why would you give up on Barnabas after all you’ve been through. You two went through the wars together! You traveled thousands of miles. You endured sleepless nights and hunger. You faced angry mobs and death threats. You planted the church in Antioch together and spent a year as co-pastors. How many times have the two of you been on your knees together in prayer side by side?! And you are just going to throw that way? I understand your concerns about Mark, but Paul, is it worth it?”

And then I would say to Paul, “And explain to me again why you won’t give John Mark a second chance. Make me understand why you, Paul, are unwilling to give someone a shot at redemption? Because, forgive me if I’m wrong, but didn’t God give you a pretty big second chance. Forgive me Paul, but when I see what you are doing here, for some reason the parable of the unmerciful servant keeps coming to mind.”

“And furthermore, my third question to you dear friend, you don’t like Barnabas sticking up for Mark. But don’t you remember what Barnabas did for you!? After your conversion, you came to Jerusalem, but none of the other believers wanted any part of you. They were all afraid of you. They didn’t believe that you’d changed. But somebody believed in you. Somebody said, no, Paul’s okay! He’s changed! He should be part of the team! Who was that?! Oh wait I remember...it was Barnabas! Now he’s doing the same thing for Mark and you want to show him the door?! It’s not very gracious. Frankly, there’s a whiff of hypocrisy here.” When I look at the grace Paul has received in the past, I don’t think Paul does conflict particularly well here. It’s yet another Scriptural example of how even great saints are badly flawed human beings, in need of grace.

But when we look at Paul’s behavior here in light of the future, we see something else. Compare Acts 15 with the things Paul writes and says later in his life, and it seems as though the Holy Spirit changes Paul. If you look at Paul later in life, I think that older Paul would take younger Paul aside and talk some sense into him. For example, compare Paul’s behavior in our passage with what he writes in Philippians 1. Apparently there are some people in the area who are preaching Christ for selfish motives. They are in it for the attention, or maybe for the money. How does Paul react? Verse 18: “What does it matter, the important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.” Do you hear how different that is? Paul is so uncompromising in our passage, but in Philippians he sounds downright laid back.

Or compare Paul’s behavior in our passage to the conflict advice Paul gives in Ephesians 4. “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in through the bond of peace.” That’s great advice. But it’s

not how Paul behaves in our passage. He does not make every effort. He is not completely humble and patient.

It's worth noting that the split with Barnabas happens around 48 AD. It's right at the beginning of Paul's mission and he's full of zeal and ambition. The letters to Ephesus and Philippi are probably written in the early 60's AD. So approximately 12 years have passed since the fight and they have had an eventful 12 years. In those 12 years, Paul has been to prison at least three times. He has endured shipwrecks and beatings. He has been flogged and stoned. 2 Corinthians 1 tells us that he has been driven to the edge of despair. And through these experiences, the Holy Spirit has clearly led him to a different way of looking at conflict.

How specifically has Paul been changed? What does the Holy Spirit grow in him? I think we see the Spirit grow him in a virtue that is central to good Christian conflict. The Holy Spirit grows Paul in humility. "Be completely humble and gentle" says Paul in Ephesians 4. In Philippians 2: "In humility, consider value others above yourselves." Christian conflict is characterized by humility. I have the sense that humility isn't a virtue that Paul comes to easily. I have a feeling that he's used to being the smartest guy in the room. But, as Paul himself attests in passages like Philippians 3:1-14, the Spirit keeps moving him away from righteous pride and toward humility.

If we Christians want to do conflict well, humility is essential. It is so important that we enter into our conflict with a real sense that we might be wrong. We need to remember all the times we have been wrong in the past and have been sustained by the forgiveness of God and the patience of others. Pride makes us forgetful. One of pride's tricks is to make us forget our failures and the grace we've received. Paul certainly seems to have forgotten here. We are imperfect people, so even when we feel certain, we might be wrong. Over my continuing education break a couple of weeks ago, I re-read *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It's a classic work on Christian community. Bonhoeffer believes that confession is key to community. Bonhoeffer says that public confession, like we did at the beginning of this service and like what we do at the beginning of every service, is key to community. Because confession helps deflate our pride and grow our humility. Here's a quote "The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everyone must conceal himself from himself and from the fellowship." You can't have a community of broken people without acknowledging our brokenness and making room for each other's failures. Perfectionism makes communities rigid and brittle; humility makes communities gracious and flexible.

The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit puts virtues in us that are designed to make room for each other's failure. The Holy Spirit grows virtues that make us aware of our own weakness, and help us make room for the weakness of others. Humility. When I am humble, I admit my opinion might be wrong. I own the brokenness of my intellect. Patience. When I am patient, I admit that my sense of how things should go might be wrong. I own the brokenness of my will. Forbearance. When I practice forbearance, I learn to control my emotional response to other people's behavior. I admit that my emotions are broken. Communities need both form and flexibility. Healthy communities have rules and boundaries, but also grace and room. All these virtues teach us our own weakness and they help us make room for the weakness of others.

Finally, the Holy Spirit seems to teach Paul not only by giving him a sense of his own weakness, but also by giving him a richer sense of God's care for the church. Why is Paul so adamant about excluding John Mark? Because he seems to believe that John Mark has the power to make or break the mission. He puts a strong emphasis on the importance of the people to make this happen. Like the kingdom is a human task.

Of course human competence is important. We all look for skill when we hire people and choose leaders, but if you look at Scripture and you look at church history, the truth is human beings mess things up and then the Holy Spirit comes along and cleans up the mess. Paul and Barnabas make a mess of things. Their fight is foolish and wrong, but as a result of the fight, Paul and Silas go off on a missionary journey that becomes enormously fruitful. For the first time the gospel actually makes it to Europe. Barnabas and Mark go to Cyprus to minister. Their work is fruitful too. Verse 31 tells us the churches were strengthened. Once again, God takes the human mess, enters into it, and redeems it. He bends our foolishness towards his purposes.

The Holy Spirit also cleans up the broken relationships. Paul and Barnabas seem to get over their differences. In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul speaks positively about Barnabas' ministry, and in Colossians 4:10 he mentions his old friend and mentor again. The Holy Spirit works some sort of reconciliation. We know that Paul and John Mark overcame their differences. In his letter to Philemon, Paul mentions Mark by name, which suggests he was working alongside Paul again. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul sends Mark to Colossae and even commends him to the church. And then there's this. When Paul is much older, towards the end of his life, probably just before he is executed, Paul is in prison, and he's lonely and cold. Guess whose company he wants? Mark's. 2 Timothy 4: "Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you." In his time of crisis, in his time of uncertainty, Paul wants to see Mark. Mark becomes one of the people Paul calls to his deathbed. What a moving scene. Paul, old and imprisoned and a little afraid, now embraced by the boy he once dismissed. Mark has become one of the most important people in Paul's life. The Holy Spirit took this homesick boy and made him into a strong servant and a good friend.

Our hope for the church does not rest in the excellence of the people, it rests in the faithfulness of the Spirit. There are important issues facing the church. Let us diligently seek God's will and truth in these matters. We will not resolve these issues without conflict. As we enter into this conflict, may we do so with humility, patience and forbearance. And may we move forward trusting that Christ who gave his life to create this community, will certainly preserve his church.

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