

Text: Acts 15:36-41

Intended audience: All

My purpose for this message: To help people conclude that disagreements are normal, and handle them in godly fashion

Delivered: March 7, 2004 @ KEFC by Keith Rohrer

## [Book Thesis: The Power of God Spreads the Gospel]

### When Christians have Valid Disagreements

#### PRAY.

10 months ago, a middle-aged potato farmer in Maine, dropped a couple of fistfuls of arsenic into the church coffeepot at Gustav Adolph Evangelical Lutheran Church in Maine. In his suicide note Daniel Bondeson said he wanted to give 5 church members a bellyache like they gave him. Actually, 16 members got sick and one died. Believing the poison would only cause sickness, Bondeson was so remorseful he took his life.

I know of church conflict where the police have had to be called. Of fights in public meetings that culminated in pastors and deacons drawing guns.

Conflict in church is normal, because *conflict* is normal. Watch any reality show! As one observer said,

*While they are just TV shows, and everyone knows that it's just a game, it still boils down to promoting one winner, ... and promoting conflict instead of working together. ... They [shows] are stupid, brainless, and appeal to the sort of slobbering morons that the modern western world seems to be doing their best to breed...*

Ouch! Actually I have never watched a reality show on purpose... But what little I have seen and read of them suggests they thrive on conflict. In *real* reality, conflict doesn't need to be manufactured for ratings; it grows naturally in our homes, our friendships, our schools, our business, our churches. You're either *energized* by it, or terrorized by it: conflict makes you either fight or take flight.

Like most of you, I'm a flyer. I hate conflict so much I turn off a talk show if an argument starts. But in his book *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, Ken Sande says conflict is not necessarily bad or destructive. Even when stressful or is caused by sin, God can use it to glorify Himself, teach us to serve, and help us grow more Christlike. What if we miss these *good* things in our rush to run?

Let's do a conflict case study: a major quarrel between two of God's choice leaders.

READ Acts 15:36-41. PRAY

#### Story

These words are the first chapter in Paul's second missionary trip. It was 3 years long, 3 chapters in Acts, and covered about 2000 miles (although much time was spent in Corinth).

Perhaps a year home on furlough, Paul thought it would be good to check on the new churches they'd planted. Barnabas agreed, "Great idea; let's take along my cousin John Mark." It got real quiet. For maybe 2 seconds. Then I imagine Paul, author of 13 Bible books, greatest missionary ever, church planter *par excellence*, exploded.

"You cannot be serious. On the last trip he deserted us in Pamphylia (13:13) and you want to do that all over again? You can't be serious. He's not reliable!" The air grew hot as the two had what Dr. Luke calls a "sharp disagreement." Barnabas had mentored Paul. Had run interference for him in Jerusalem when others were dubious about his so-called conversion. These two had walked hundreds of miles together, spoke often

together late into the night, preached the gospel together, planted churches together, and suffered together. While they shared a vision for the growth of the gospel, they did not share a vision for this young man's future.

Luke tiptoes around the matter of blame, not even *hinting* that one man was right and the other wrong.

I think that was intentional. Paul was right to take past experience into account. Barnabas was right to be optimistic about this young recruit.

Because they could not agree, they split: Barnabas headed west to Cyprus with John Mark, and Paul took Silas north with him through Syria to Cilicia and beyond. They delivered the Jerusalem letter to the Gentile churches, taught, encouraged, and fellowshiped with them.

As we page through the NT a little more, I'm going to give you 3 questions to ask when you're in the middle of a hot disagreement with someone; especially someone you care about.

- **Can we save us?**
- **Was I wrong?**
- **What's God up to?**

### **1. Can we save us?**

The question means, can we preserve our relationship (friendship, acquaintance, working relationship, marriage, whatever it is)? Sometimes the other person decides for you. He stops speaking to you, or she avoids you altogether. But I believe in *most* cases just one person *can* save "us." While no doubt Paul and Barnabas stewed for a time over what happened, they appear to have remained friends, and possibly worked together again. READ 1 Cor.9:6: *Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?* (Being written about 6 years after their quarrel, apparently their partnership in the gospel endured. Paul knew what Barnabas was doing, and singled him out from other fellow ministers, to include in his illustration.)

I don't know what the two of them did to save the "us," but I know one trait that one or both men must have demonstrated: humility. My ego is the #1 obstacle in conflict. James 4:6 reminds us that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Let me give you 4 ways to be humble in or after conflict.

- **Pray:** Most important: pray for the other person. (Lk.23:34)
- **Honor:** Do not speak ill about him/her to others. (Jas. 4:11)
- **Talk:** Start a conversation with the other person, totally unrelated to what you disagreed about. Hard because almost seems like doing this is admitting we were wrong, or our disagreement unimportant.
- **Favor:** Do something for the other person. (Prov.25:22: means kindness shown stirs up pangs of conscience, sorrow and remorse for conduct)

### **2. Was I wrong?**

In the days and months after a big disagreement, keep an open mind—willing to entertain the question, "was I wrong?" Paul and Barnabas' quarrel erupted because Paul believed Mark would hurt the ministry, while Barnabas believed Mark could be reclaimed for ministry. Both were *so* convinced they were right that they were willing to

risk their friendship. Eventually, Barnabas rebuilt this young man into such an effective missionary, that Paul himself later worked with him. READ 2 Tim. 4:11 [13 years after the conflict], Col. 4:10 [11 years later], Philemon 24 [11 years later].

Did that mean Paul was wrong to oppose taking the guy? No, his track record *wasn't* good. Which *should* have raised warning flags. But by God's grace, Mark *did* become reliable and valuable. Paul was man enough to see it—and admit it. He could have been too proud and kept telling himself Mark would sooner or later fumble and prove Paul right. Instead, he used him, himself. Don't be afraid to ask yourself, was I wrong? Or even if I was right, have things happened that should make me rethink my position?

### **3. What's God up to?**

Behind two good friends butting heads over a missionary candidate, something else was going on behind the scenes. In *every* situation, behind *every* event, God is moving this, changing that, directing these, orchestrating that, for... his... glory. To accomplish his purposes. READ Eph.1:11; Prov.16:4.

Consequently, what at first looks like a territory clash between two men with strong convictions, is actually a God-move to broaden His mission effort. Instead of 2 men working one area, 4 men were covering twice as much ground. Typically, our man-centered thinking, like blinders, keeps us from seeing anything beyond what's right in front of us: what affects *us*. God-centered thinking gives us peripheral vision to see—or at least see reasons to suspect, that God is on the move too.

#### **Concl:**

Paul was greatly used by God. Perhaps that's why he had to endure so much conflict with friend and foe alike. Erwin Lutzer observed, *God seldom removes us from conflict, but uses it to bring about spiritual maturity.*

This Thursday, we have a meeting to discuss—and vote on—purchasing 4 acres across Pequea Drive. (By the way, you're all invited, although only members can participate in the discussion and vote.) Will there be differences of opinions? Almost certainly. Could some conflicting opinions be valid? Probably. Two years ago 93% of us said we believed God wanted us to pursue the purchase of the acreage behind Christ's Home. One year ago we withdrew from that agreement over deed restrictions. Were the 7% right and the rest wrong? Maybe. Maybe not. Did we continue to work with each other? Absolutely. Was God up to something? Absolutely. Do we know what? Not really. Oh, we have guesses, but God has not seen fit to tell us what he was up to during that year.

Anyway, my point is, as we have conflict, how about if instead of running from it, instead of becoming belligerent with each other, we trust that God's up to something, do all we can to save our relationships, and be humble about our own position. We—and the church—would benefit.