

Christians in Conflict

Acts 15:36-40

What do you do when Brothers in Christ disagree?

What do you do when in the midst of a discussion, the opinions of two Sisters in the Lord become controversial, then argumentative and sharp?

Even when, or perhaps I should say **particularly when** the discussion, argument, or contention is in reference to spiritual things?

How do we handle that kind of conflict and still keep our hearts pure before God and usable for His Kingdom's work.

Well, I can tell you what not to say. You don't want to look at your Brother or Sister and say, *"You're dumber than a box of rocks! I can't even believe you're saved!"*

I mean really, that's just not going help at all... Not that I speak of experience... it's just one of those things...

Well, spiritual conflict is what we are going to be looking at today. It's not an exhaustive study, but it is in response to the section in Acts we find ourselves in today, so I invite you to look at the passage found in Acts 15, beginning in verse 36.

Now, before we get into the passage, let me remind you that Paul and Barnabus have been serving the Lord Jesus together now for a number of years. It was Barnabus who went and got Paul from his home area of Tarsus in Syria to come and help with the work in Antioch of Syria.

Barnabus and Paul had been the ones who were called out by the Holy Spirit to go and preach the Gospel to the Gentiles of the regions of Asia and Galatia. Many new Believers had been drawn into the Kingdom of God due to the faithful witness of these two Brothers, these two co-laborers in the Lord. They had traveled together, ministered together, and even suffered persecution together.

Now after that First Missionary Journey, the Lord allowed them to stay in Antioch for a long time with the other Disciples in Antioch (14:28), serving together as they ministered to the Body of Christ.

Then at the beginning of chapter 15, a problem arose as the Judaiarose and come into Antioch saying that the Gentiles couldn't really be Christian until they became Jews, so, once again as brothers in the Lord Jesus, Paul and Barnabus traveled together. This time to Jerusalem to deal with this issue before the Apostles.

Everything finally got settled as the Church determined not to lay the burden of the Law on these Gentile Believers, but simply gave them some practical steps to take, so as not to fall into sin or their old pagan lifestyles. Then in 15:30 Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabus and the others that came with them from Antioch returned to Antioch, and a couple of the teachers and prophets from Jerusalem (a fellow by the name of Judas and another named Silas) went with them to testify and affirm the decision of the Jerusalem Counsel and they stayed for a bit to encourage the saints in Antioch. We pick it up in verse 33 –

Acts 15

³³ And after they had stayed there (in Antioch) for a time, they were sent back (to Jerusalem) 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.

Everything was going great, the Brothers were ministering and dwelling together in unity and the Church of Antioch was being blessed by great teaching and the preaching of the Word.

Then after a while, the Holy Spirit laid a burden on Paul to go back and check on those new Churches which were birthed during their earlier missionary journey. Verse 36 –

Acts 15

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.*

The plan, the overall idea was a good one: "*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.*"

You don't want to give birth to a bunch of new believers and then just leave them to fend for themselves. There needs to be **an ongoing plan of Discipleship and spiritual development**. Paul wanted to check on these new Believers, to see if there was anything or any areas where he and his Brother Barnabus could assist them.

The plan was good, but the particulars of the plan had a bit of a glitch in it.

Barnabus, the Son of Encouragement wanted to bring John Mark back out on the Mission Field and assist him in his growth and direction of ministry with the Lord and His people. Remember, John Mark was a close relative of Barnabus..., and Barnabus was an encourager anyway – **it's what he did**.

You can imagine the conversation. It probably went south, real quick –

When Luke relays this event to us, he uses a particular word that is translated as the phrase ***“the contention became so sharp”***, or as some versions have it, ***“there arose a sharp contention”***. **Kittel's Greek Dictionary of New Testament Words** states this is actually the Greek compound word *paroxusmos* (par-ox-oos-mos'). A verb meaning *“to stir to anger,”* even *“to be provoked, enraged.”*

It carries with it the idea of *“provocation”* or *“irritation.”* And as a verb it occurs in Acts 17:16 (where Paul is in Athens, when *“his spirit was **provoked** within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols”*), where the meaning is not that Paul is just ***stimulated to preach*** but that he is ***honestly angered by the idolatry***.

Back here in Acts 15:39, it is in the noun form and has the sense of a *rising or stirring “irritation”* as Paul and Barnabas disagree about taking Mark with them.¹

I want you to clearly see that this wasn't some small disagreement about where you want to eat lunch: *“I think we ought to have Greek food for lunch.” “No, no, we had Greek yesterday, let's have some Kosher stuff today.”* And then you end up going for Mexican food or something.

¹ Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1985), 791.

No, this was a heated discussion, something so intense, it pull at the connection of two friends, two Brothers in Christ, two ministry partners. And Luke tells us plainly “*the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another.*”

And that was that. We don't hear of Barnabas again through the entire book of Acts. The only time he is mentioned in the writings of Paul is when he is recalling the earlier days of their times together.

I wish I could say that this never happens any more. I wish I could say that it has never happened in this Church before or to me personally. But the truth is, it has happened. It's happened in the area of ministry and it's happened in the area of personal relations. I'm not saying who was the right one and who was the wrong one, the Lord will straighten that all out. What I'm saying is, it has happened, and undoubtedly it's probably happened to some of you. So how do we deal with conflict as Brothers and Sisters in Christ?

I feel it's very noteworthy that some of the clearest understandings we get from the New Testament actually comes from the pen of the Apostle Paul – **a man very acquainted with conflict** – a man of experience on how to do it right AND how to do it wrong.

We learned through the words of Jesus how important it was to love one another, and the words of Paul add to that word as he tells us in Romans 12:10

¹⁰ Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another;

So, when we **start out with that heart**, we're less likely to get into heated arguments, but... they still happen.

So Paul tells us we need to strive... to strive at being **like-minded** –

Romans 15

*⁵ Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be **like-minded toward one another**, according to Christ Jesus, ⁶ that you may with **one mind and one mouth** glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

He says a very similar thing in Philippians 2:2 –

² fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. ³ Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in

lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. ⁴ Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

The writer of Hebrews, many believing to be the Apostle Paul reminds us in 12:14 –

¹⁴ Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:

That's right in line with what Paul did write in Romans 12:18

¹⁸ If it's possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.

And his words to the Church at Ephesus – (Ephesians 4)

¹ ...walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, ² with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, ³ endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Nowhere here is he talking about compromising the Gospel, but he is speaking at working towards **peaceful resolutions when conflict arises**.

It's Paul that also tells us that if we have major disputes within the Body of Christ, we need to settle it if at all possible **within the Body of Christ** not the courts of the land –

1 Corinthians 6

*⁷ Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law (secular courts) against **one another**. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated?*

And on and on we could go, and these are only the words of Paul. The other writers of the NT speak the same message, all of them stemming from the words of our Savior,

John 13

³⁴ "love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.".

One other thing that came to my attention as I was looking at this during the week: It's absolutely amazing how many times the Apostle Paul uses the word "peace". As a matter of fact, every one of his letters start out with the phrase, "Grace to you and peace" or something very similar, but always with "peace".

All throughout his letters he encourages the Church to **pursue and live in peace** – more so in the book of Romans and Ephesians than any of the others, but all his books and letters speak

of it. Also, the phrases “**to be like-minded**” or to be “**of the same mind**” are also found **continually woven** throughout his writings.

It all draws us back to the words of King David, in the Psalms –

Psalm 133

1 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

Personally, I wonder how much the **regret** of that **sharp contention** and **separation** from his Brother Barnabus continued to work on Paul’s heart throughout his ministry.

So, we know we need to dwell together in unity, but how do we deal specifically with those times when conflict arises? And there will be those times. And sometimes, the issues of the conflict are of such nature, that we need to actually walk through and work through the conflict for the betterment of each other and the Body of Christ.

One thing you can be assured of, it takes a **holy dedication** and a **loving persistence** to work through **conflict in a positive way**. But in the end, as Christian Brothers and Sisters, we can actually all be the better for it.

Understand this morning that I am borrowing heavily from the website “Desiring God”, and from an article by Pastor Josh Squires.

The foundation of his article on Christian Conflict is from a passage taken from Paul’s letter to the Colossians.

Look with me at Colossians 3:12 –

Colossians 3

*¹² Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on **tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering**; ¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.*

1. (Tender Mercies) Compassioni

*It is no surprise that compassion is the first attribute listed for Paul. To be compassionate means to be moved, deeply, **by someone else’s situation**. In order to be moved by someone else’s condition, we must struggle to understand his or her condition.*

*It means being **quick to hear and slow to speak**. It means being willing to understand how*

they've been hurt, even when you are the one who has done the wounding. This is especially difficult when both parties feel that they've been wronged. However, it is a sign of spiritual maturity to be the first one to lay aside (if only temporarily) one's own feelings in order to listen to someone else's.

2. Kindness

*Kindness is **compassion in action**. Be willing to show through your actions that even in the midst of conflict you **still love and care for one another**. Nothing can escalate a conflict more quickly than a poorly placed **eye roll, shrug, or sigh**. Body language and tone of voice are crucial to communicating care in tense times. Being kind also means **guarding your thoughts and your words**. You need to seek to have **constructive communication**, not being drawn into negative expressions of your own feelings, led by your own hurt and anger.*

You definitely need to confront those thoughts. But you need to remind yourself that you, too, are a sinner who desperately needs grace. Remembering that the Lord taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

3. Humility

Humility is not just a state of being, it is an active word. It is action without regard for reward. Die to your desire for personal gain through conflict and instead come alive to the idea that you have an incredible opportunity to display Christ!

4. (Meekness) Gentleness

*Gentleness is an active word also, a purposeful action. This means that our conflict needs a measure of **calm, caring intentionality to it**. A determination to win a Brother or Sister back, **not simply win the argument**. Making your point known and clear to the other party needs to be more of a **strategic release of pressure than a volcanic eruption of emotion**.*

***Also, not all hurts need to be discussed**. In some areas, we need to simply try to forgive and just move on. But if you can't or if it's bigger than that, then be wise about how and when you discuss it. Taking the time to pray through the situation and carefully formulate the words to express the situation (**perhaps even write them out**). That will allow you to be more insightful and calmer in the midst of the discussion, purposefully choosing words which are not meant to be hurtful and are without accusation.*

Your intent should always be reconciliation, not trying to pay back or hurt others.

5. (Longsuffering) Patience

“Hurry Lord, give me patience! Now!!”

We laugh about that, but the fact is, patience does not come easily for most of us. But, it is a part of the Fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5.

Patience allows us to continue to work towards conflict resolution and reconciliation even when it doesn't appear to yield results.

Here's an interesting factoid for you: People tend to struggle with the same sorts of things their entire lives.

- *Are you friends with someone who often just doesn't think through what they are about to say?*
- *Is your spouse someone who doesn't communicate well?*
- *Does your sibling or ministry partner stink at details?*

*Guess what, that's probably not to going to dramatically change anytime soon. We don't have to pretend that those things don't cause hurt... that they don't cause conflict — they do — but we shouldn't let our expectations get too crazy either. As Josh Squires reminds us: **Being a lovingly consistent voice is far greater than an occasionally shrill one.**²*

There are powerful directives for additional life choices given in that Colossians passage – *put on **tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering***

¹⁴ *(And) above all these things put on love...,*

¹⁵ *And let the peace of God rule in your hearts...,*

¹⁶ *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...,*

¹⁷ *And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*

The problem comes with trying to work through Colossians 3:12-17 while you're in the middle of a conflict — that can be an **almost impossible task**. That's why we need to determine **ahead of time**, that our lives will be a demonstration of the principles shown in that verse **TODAY... right now.**

Rather it is training in sports or for combat, you practice the basics over and over until they become second nature to you. You go through drill after drill until you are worn out, but all the

² www.desiringgod.org/articles/christian-conflict 2015 article by Josh Squires, Pastor of Counseling and Congregational Care, First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina.

time it is building muscle memory and brain tracks that will take over in the midst of the competition or conflict.

In the same way, when the attributes listed in this passage are an active ongoing part of our lives during the “good times” – the times of *peace*, then we have a solid pattern to fall back on when conflict arises... it has become a part of who we are and how we normally operate in our Christian walk.