

# First Contact

## 5. When Christians Disagree (Acts 15, Galatians 2:1-21)

*Acts 15:36 Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. 39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.*

A characteristic of the Bible over just about other all great religious works is its brutal honesty! It tells it how it is with no attempt to hide the failures and weaknesses of God's people - however great they were. They come across as real. Where else would you find a story like this. Two great men of God who had experienced a close working relationship falling out and in public too. How terrible that a great partnership be split over personality issues!

Right from the outset, disagreement has been one of the unfortunate characteristics of the Church. In one aspect this has led to dissension and people in the world will point at that disunity and condemn us for it. But on the other hand, disagreement has also build unity and powerful ministries, which seems a strange thing to say.

Most churches resolve their differences quickly and in love. In fact, most churches can live with differences of opinion about things because they see their love relationship in Christ as more important. But we all know stories of church splits where love has perhaps been on the bottom of the agenda and a split has occurred. We can't avoid that truth and differences in opinion can be damaging. In Scotland dissension amongst Presbyterians has led to the established church, the Church of Scotland being divided form its much more conservative rival known as the Wee Free.

*The story is told of a Church of Scotland Minister making overtures to his Wee free counterpart in a Scottish town. The CoS Minister said "We both have the same fundamental beliefs and they should walk together despite their differing traditions. "Aye, that's true, we must", said the Wee Free Minister, "You go your way, and I'll go in His."*

In this series we have seen how as the gospel spread from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria to the uttermost parts of the world, that the core of Jewish believers that made up the church at Pentecost needed to have their horizons altered to understand that the purposes of God included the Gentiles and how in Acts 10 we saw how Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile was brought to Christ and how Peter was faced with this challenge and the dilemmas he went through. At the same time Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene were already facing the

same challenge in style by founding the ground-breaking church at Antioch through which countless numbers of Gentiles received Christ.

We saw how God raised up people who were able to minister to converts from Greek paganism to Christianity (the church at Antioch started that term too) and teach them the things of God. No-one had ever taught the Christian faith to people with a non-Christian, non-Jewish background before and God raised up someone new who had the knowledge of the scriptures but who also knew Greek and Roman society well enough to communicate the truths of God. In the first instance we had Barnabas a Cypriot and then Paul, from Tarsus

So whilst the apostles at Jerusalem were taking in what for them was a huge change in their culture and horizons, the church at Antioch was exploding in growth and innovating in mission. But the question remains, how convinced were James and the apostles at Jerusalem that what Paul and Barnabas was doing was legitimate and of God? In Galatians 2 Paul gives us some revealing information about the problems at Jerusalem. Peter was clearly convinced and was happy to mix with the Gentiles on a visit to Antioch but was then reluctant to continue to eat with the Gentiles when a delegation from James came to visit. Paul picked him up on his hypocrisy. So Peter was happy, but what about James? That's less clear.

This came to a head in Acts 15 when it was clear that there were some Jewish "believers" (Paul suggests they are false in Gal 2) that clearly weren't going the way of Antioch and arrive there to try to make them convert to Judaism. This brought them into dispute with Paul and Barnabas and they took the matter to Jerusalem.

This was the first public dispute in the Church and was resolved. It's put here so that we can learn from it as we deal with disputes. First of all, this was a dispute about fundamental change. Jewish believers were being asked to accept Gentile believers even though they had no intention of being circumcised and following Jewish law - and in fact had been taught by Paul and Barnabas that it was unnecessary.

Change. We are going through a process of change here in Swaffham. We are being asked to look to doing new things and reconsider those things we have done in the past as we tread a new direction. And maybe we're not going to agree on things. We're not going to agree on certain changes. We're not going to like giving up certain things.

I know that our visitors from Norwich also have a big change as they try to blend two congregations together. Different congregations, different histories, different worship styles, different backgrounds, but all one in Christ and desiring to work, worship and witness together. Great! But you are going to find the same. People will disagree. Which buildings do you keep? Which do you sell? What is the format of worship? Who does what? What will be our direction in evangelism or anything else?

But in any Church we go through periods where people disagree. Sometimes those disagreements are doctrinal such as about the gifts of the Spirit, sometimes they are about style - about which version of the Bible, or the singing of hymns in a particular way and sometimes they are just petty - what the decor of the chapel should be. Sometimes when we explore where we should be going as a church such as choosing a Pastor or the future direction of the church's ministry, we are presented with options - which way must we move?

In some churches, I'm going to say something that is very un-Baptist. I know it's not true of every Baptist Church or even most. Decisions are not made on a vote and should never be so. Listen to this quote from a very surprising source:

*"Nowhere in the Bible is the word DEMOCRACY mentioned. Ideally, when Christians meet, as Christians, to take counsel together their purpose is not (or should not be) to ascertain with is the mind of the majority but what is the mind of the Holy Spirit - something which may be quite different."*

*Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.*

We don't make decisions on the basis of majorities or even according to conventional values. We make those decisions on what God wants and our task is to discern God's will. That's what they were doing in Jerusalem. It wasn't to determine rights and wrongs - but to decide what God was doing so they could follow.

So what did they do? It would seem that they tried to discern what God was doing - where His will was in this matter of accepting Gentiles as part of God's family.

- ◆ they listened to testimony of what God had done
- ◆ they listened to leaders whose authority they accepted as being of God
- ◆ they heeded God's written Word

### ◆ ***They listened to testimony of what God had done***

*Verse 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.*

Paul and Barnabas reported all that had happened. Look at the way this is worded - they reported everything GOD had done through them. They were bearing testimony to the ways of God. Whatever men had been saying about what God could and couldn't do - what was God **actually** doing.

I find this quite a salutary point because this cuts through all the all the barriers of our religious prejudices. God can't work with these people because they baptise infants. God can't work with these people because they speak in tongues. God can't work with these people because they don't speak in tongues. God can't work with these people because we don't approve of their lifestyle. God can't be in these people's worship because they use drums and jump around a lot. God can't use these people because their worship is trad.

How dare we decide what God can and can't do. How dare we be so superior as to think that someone else is too sinful for God to work in their midst. We are just as fallen and sinful as the people we criticise.

Let's see what God is doing. Let's recognise it and give God the glory. Let's fellowship with those whom God is moving amongst so that we may build one another up.

I say this because I believe that suspicion and insularity are the two great sins of God's people in Norfolk. And we must recognise a work of God and break down the barriers.

Our Church foundation stone has a very far-thinking motto. It's far thinking because it was laid in 1858.

*In things Indifferent - liberty*

*In things essential - unity*

*In all things - charity*

By things indifferent our forefathers meant things that were not essential for salvation. For evangelicals in the nineteenth century it was important to recognise those in whose lives God was working because they had found Christ, they knew God's forgiveness. They were product of God's grace, mercy and love. This was the thing essential - that God had moved in a work of grace to accept people through Christ. It's the only criterion that God has for accepting people into His kingdom. If they are acceptable to Him, then they are acceptable to us. This is our work of unity. This is the unity of all believers - we're accepted, we're forgiven.

Indifferent things are those things which are not essential for salvation. Mode of worship, version of Bible, doctrine of the Spirit, religious denomination, mode of baptism, attitude to women in leadership, mode of dress. Of course it doesn't mean tolerance of sin, because repentance is part and parcel of salvation. The main problem as they found in Jerusalem in Acts 15, some believers (or were they?) had taken salvation and added to it other laws and regulations - the Law, particularly the Pharisees' version - and then judged people by them.

We do the same. We take the gospel and we add our way to it as essentials - the Baptist way, the Authorised Version way, the Charismatic way, the traditional way. And then we decide if they don't believe what we believe then

they can't be Christians. This is what the Pharisees were doing at the Council of Jerusalem. Yet the evidence showed something quite different.

### ***they listened to leaders whose authority they accepted as being of God***

*After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."*

As they considered the facts, Peter strongly affirms that the Gentiles could believe. Peter's testimony was very strong testimony. He spoke with authority and affirmed their testimony. When we are in disagreement, it sometimes helps to heed the voices of wiser men or those we accept have a prophetic word. Peter had a particular revelation from God as we read in Chapter 10. He had something to say and it backed up the evidence of experience. When we are trying to discern the voice of God, let's be prepared to listen to what God is saying to us from those we respect as being men or women of God. All people are fallible and sometimes even the wisest can be mistaken. And that's why at the Council of Jerusalem they didn't just rely on testimony and wisdom alone.

### ***they heeded God's written Word***

Listen to how James summed this up.

*"After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' 18 that have been known for ages.*

James correctly compares the experience of testimony and the word given with what Scripture says. He quotes Amos chapter 9 which was one of a number of OT scriptures which focus on how a time was coming where Gentiles would bear God's name.

I believe this passage is important, not just as we explore disagreements in a church, but also as we seek God's face as to our future as a church, whether that church is in Swaffham or in Norwich. We need to see what God is doing, where he's leading us. We need to listen to those who lead us, who give us prophetic words and we need to compare all this to the truths of scripture.

And at Jerusalem they discerned God's will - and they walked with it a letter of welcome to the Gentiles. The only conditions they put, if conditions they were was the bit about abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.

Having discerned God's will, they walked with it irrespective of what their human conditioning had told them previously. They were happy to go with it and missionary work continued apace amongst the Gentiles.

I believe this passage gives us a challenge. It's a challenge that when we disagree, we seek God's face. But even when we don't - in big issues we still seek His face, listen to what He's saying and when we discern that will we go forward in faith.

But does disagreement bring forth unity? For the leaders at Jerusalem it certainly made them go forward in unity. In fact this decision was far reaching and brought into unity people accepted as the leaders in the Church. They recognised what God was doing and prepared to walk with it.

But there were still dissenters and they pestered the church for decades to the point where Paul placed them as false teachers because of their refusal to follow the clearly demonstrated will of God.

For Paul personally, he was also involved in disagreement with Barnabas a little later on. We don't know what John Mark did that Paul wouldn't take him with Barnabas on another missionary journey. But Barnabas wouldn't back down and they parted their ways.

We don't know all the rights and wrongs but Paul is commended from Antioch and furthers the work of God as he went with Silas on the next missionary journey. Barnabas wasn't commended and he returned with Mark to his native Cyprus. Disagreement doesn't always end up all smiles.

Perhaps that has happened in your life at some point. If so, I would encourage you to pray about it. I don't believe that disagreements and splits are a particularly good way about going about God's business, but God can make good out of our sinfulness. Look for a moment at these verses

*Col 4:10 My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)*

*2 Tim 4: 11 Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.*

And there were obviously no hard feelings with Luke who recorded this disagreement in Acts 15.

*Philemon 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.*

How may we conclude this.

We are called as people to do God's will, not ours. Remember that when you find yourself in dispute or disagreement with other believers. Examine yourself. Is this really in the will of God? We are here to His will, not mine!

How do we deal with disagreements or disputes? With love, in prayer, seeking God's will?

That's what they did at the Council of Jerusalem and they sought and found the will of God and they walked in it to great effect.

Do we know God's will as a Church. Do we know His direction. As you know this is something that has been exercising the leadership here. Which direction - our direction or God's direction?



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