

How to disagree in the Church, and still be family

Message for July 26, 2015 by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Acts 15:1-31

Theme Time

As we begin this, everyone receives a foot-long piece of cord.

Leader: Lord, remind us that the cords of our being are formed from many single strands: family, neighbourhood, school, friendships. Each strand by itself possesses certain strengths, but bound together they become a stronger part of the whole cord.

People: Open our memories to the many strands which make up our individual cords.

(Quiet prayer)

Leader: Lord, we learn to place value on our friendships. We do not give true friendship lightly. Trust is crucial in our friendships, and trust is both given and earned.

People: Open our memories to the times in which friendships have been tested.

(Quiet prayer)

Leader: Lord, sometimes friendships can be strained, and we long for healing and restoration, which you alone can provide.

People: Open our hearts and spirits to the need for healing and restoration in our broken friendships.

(Quiet prayer)

Leader: Lord, make room in our hearts for the entrance of others yet unknown to us. Help us to befriend them and to place a great value on their friendship for your sake.

People: Open our spirits to welcome the strangers who will become beloved friends. Empower us to be willing to risk friendship in Christ's name. Amen.

Following this prayer, I will invite people in table groups to tie their cords together, making a longer cord. When finished, each group moves to the perimeter of the room, where the groups tie their cords together, until there is one long cord forming

a circle. While doing this, we quietly sing "Bind Us Together."

SONG: Bind Us Together

Bind us together, Lord, bind us together
With cords that cannot be broken.
Bind us together, Lord, bind us together
Bind us together with love.

There is only one God,
There is only one King,
There is only one body;
That is why we sing:

By Bob Gillman. © 1977 Kingsway's Thank-you Music.
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Message "How to disagree in the Church, and still be family"

When I was in theology school in Halifax, a woman in the church I attended invited me to her home for lunch after the service. Over lunch, we talked about all kinds of things, including the worship service. I don't remember now what the sermon was about, but I remember we sang the hymn "The Lord of the Dance." The woman was horrified.

She told me that when she was growing up (eighty years earlier), saying that Jesus had danced would have been blasphemy. She found it an offense against her Lord and it really hurt her. Then she asked what I thought about that song.

As my mind flashed back to when I was fourteen, my eyes started to mist over. I don't recall where I was I first heard that hymn, but I still remember the powerful effect it had on me. Jesus was on the cross, and I felt his suffering. I wept as the music swept over me. No other hymn had ever had such meaning for me. It taught me what Good Friday and Easter are about in a new and vivid way.

After I told her that, neither of us said anything for a minute. Then she spoke, "Well, I'll have to listen to it more closely next time."

Her remark startled me. She was a woman of deep and firm conviction. Yet she was willing to look at things in new ways. She accepted me fully as her brother in Christ and that meant she took me seriously, even though I was young and immature. Her faith was solid, but that does not mean it had hardened into concrete.

Today's Scripture reading tells of another time when people who had deep convictions also had deep differences of opinion. It's now ten years since the church was born on Pentecost Sunday. The issue was whether Gentiles who became Christians had to observe the Jewish Law. In this whole dispute the deepest of principles was involved: can a person earn the favour of God?

Acts 15:5, New International Version:

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

This group was saying, "Being a Christian means earning God's favour by keeping the Law."

Acts 15:10-11, New International Version:

[Peter said,] "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."

The apostle Peter was saying, "Being a Christian consists in casting ourselves on the grace of God." (Grace, as we've said other times, is God's love for us, even though we don't deserve it.)

This is the church's first real controversy. The issue of circumcision may be only mildly interesting to us now. The way they dealt with it is immensely valuable in what it teaches us about how to deal with conflict today, both in the church and in our relationships with others.

This is important for us today, because all churches have conflict. Back in the 1990s, when the Salvation Army in Picton was going through an intense battle, some of the members who lived north of Picton started coming to the United Church in Demorestville, where I served. I said to them, "Welcome! We'd love for you to be part of our church. However, if you think this church is any different from the one you just left, you're mistaken."

1) Run towards conflict, rather than avoid it

It was a hot controversy. It could have destroyed the church. It's our human nature that we dislike conflict. We'd rather that everyone be happy and get along with one another. Often our response is to avoid conflict:

- Look the other way, pretending that everything is fine;
- Walk the other way when you see someone from the other side;
- Hope it will just go away, and we won't have to deal with it.

None of these approaches leads to a healthy church. Like an untreated infection, conflict which is ignored just grows until it bursts wide open.

Acts 15:2, New International Version:

So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

They did not allow the conflict to fester. As soon as the issue arose, it was dealt with as quickly as possible. They decided to get together in Jerusalem, in what turned out to be the first church council. They would talk it through, trusting that the Holy Spirit would guide them in that process. Then they would follow through with what was agreed upon.

2) Respect one another as fellow believers

Acts 15:12, New International Version:

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

They listened to one another. Like my friend in Halifax, they needed first of all to accept one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Even though they had different ways of looking at their faith, they never questioned whether their opponents were indeed Christian. They trusted one another. They respected one another.

When you have a dispute with someone you care about, remember: you can still accept and love a

person while disagreeing with their ideas. You can disagree without being disagreeable.

3) Maintain the focus on Jesus, not on winning

The conflict was not left to fester, nor was it fanned to an emotional fury. Religious disputes too often end up like this. Our natural response to disagreement with others is to be more forceful and persuasive, hoping that we will win them over. In the process, we hardly notice the shift from following Jesus to winning the argument. Pride is at stake. Once winning has become our goal, the adrenalin begins to flow. It becomes a fight.

The key here is to maintain our focus on Jesus, not on ourselves. Again, when you have disputes with others, keep your aim on Christ. It sounds simple, but it is true.

4) Come to agreement, and communicate it widely

Acts 15:22-23, New International Version:

Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. With them they sent the following letter...

After they came to an agreement, the decision was relayed back to the church in Antioch both in writing, and in person (by Judas and Silas). A letter by itself could be misinterpreted, raising more questions than it answered. It might also feel cold and formal. There was already enough trouble. They took careful steps to prevent making more.

How precious personal contact can be in breaking down barriers of suspicion and misunderstanding! How much trouble can be prevented in the first place if only a visit is made!

Speculation is almost always worse than the truth. When I hear some bad news about someone, I begin to wonder what's happening. All kinds of possibilities flash through my mind. The more I think about it, the worse the situation becomes in my mind. Then, when I talk with that person, I find

that it was nothing as bad as I had imagined. Again, when there is tension and conflict, personal contact can be precious in breaking through the barriers of misunderstanding and suspicion!

Next Steps:

In summary, these are some of the ways the church dealt with its first controversy. We would do well to follow this pattern.

You don't have to; there are other ways to handle conflict. One husband said to his wife, "When I get mad at you, you never fight back. How do you control your anger?" She replied, "I clean the toilet." Confused, he asked, "How does that help?" She answered, "I use your toothbrush."

That may be emotionally satisfying. But I suggest the biblical way of handling conflict is much better.

- They dealt with it immediately.
- They respected one another as fellow Christians.
- They listened to one another.
- Their goal was to honour Jesus, not to win a debate.
- They met with others in person, to prevent misunderstanding.
- Read Acts 16 in preparation for next time (August 9)