



Sunday 24th May 2020, Stanground Baptist Church Philippians 4: 2 – 3, Conflict in the church

Conflict in the church!!!! What?! As if? Never? Hahahaha! Wherever two or three are gathered, in any walk of life, there will be different views and disagreements. We live with differences/diversity and find ways to live and work together. We manage disagreement most days in most areas of life, without really being very aware of it.

So what happens when our differences are such that we cannot find a way forward, we can't make a compromise. In Baptist churches we believe (or say we believe) that the will of the Church, meeting together before God, is the will of God as we follow it in that time. Yet the church meeting could make a decision that will make a member very bitter and unhappy. How do we align that with what we believe God is saying to the church through the church meeting?! Am I the only one who is right? Or am I refusing to listen to God? The reason I ask the question is that these two little verses, Philippians 4:2-3, are about exactly that situation. Two of Paul's mission team have had such a falling out that they can't resolve their disagreement.

There's an Irish saying, when someone asks for directions, "Hmm, well if I was going there I wouldn't start from here". Well, here is where we are. And as Paul is writing to this church in Philippi he's in a place where he would rather not be. Two of the leaders of the small house churches have fallen out. They had disagreed so profoundly that they cannot get on with each other.

What happens then? Usually people start a process I call "Social enrolment", where they recruit others to their point of view. Is it gossip? Maybe, maybe not. It's about finding people who will support us in the trenches we are digging for ourselves.

And when you get social enrolment, you get people who become polarised, so you end up with groups/churches who are sniping at each other across the void between opposing trenches. It becomes harder to listen to God and follow God's leading because we have **made a disagreement a matter of winning and losing instead of an opportunity for growth and learning.**

This is where the church at Philippi found itself. These two leaders among them, Euodia and Syntche, had fallen out so badly it was bringing the church and the good name of Jesus into disrepute. Paul had been told, such was the problem, and his solution was to PLEAD with the two leaders, and with other leaders in the church, to find a way to agree with one another, to move forward. Neither of these two leaders are criticised, neither is accused of doing anything wrong. They are affirmed in their Gospel ministry, they have brought people to faith in Jesus. And the church has a responsibility to help them to bring their differences out into the open, to air them (wounds need air to heal), to heal them and to find a way forward.

If I was going there, I wouldn't have started from here. When we meet disagreements, even before they have turned into conflicts, the way we react really depends on the way conflict was handled in the home in which we grew up. Some people never learned to deal with disagreement because disagreement with mum/dad/etc was not permitted in the home, or "don't upset your mum/dad/whoever" so we never learned to disagree in healthy ways. Violence could have arisen in conflicts and so we avoid them wherever we can. Other families happily fought and argued and shouted and yet never fell out with each other because disagreement and conflicts were resolved in healthy ways. We all grew up somewhere on this spectrum and recognising where we are now will help us when we meet conflict in any area of life. How do I react when people disagree? Why?



I wonder why these two fell out? I don't think it was doctrinal or Paul would have given his opinion. Did they like different worship songs? Did one think it was ok for children to move about and the other didn't? Was it over what colour tea cups to buy for after church coffee (that was a joke!). Did one give communion to outsiders, lepers, gentiles – woops no, they were all Gentiles!! We'll never know. So did it matter? It certainly mattered to them.

When disagreements arise in churches, whether or not they develop into conflicts, if they are not addressed they will fester and poison relationships. A major mistake that Christians make where there is disagreement is that we want to rush to "make peace" or to "be reconciled" or language like that. This simply covers up sin or denies the reality of where people stand in the issue in questions. How can you be reconciled to someone who is harming people? Where is justice in ignoring a matter just to make some false, dishonest pretence at "peace"? The issue, the situation, has to be addressed.

John (1 John 2: 9 – 11) tells us that nobody can claim to love God if they do not love their sister/brother in Christ. It is essential to Paul that the church deals with its problems, out in the open, with love and justice – otherwise Jesus is kicked out of his own church.

- Is there anyone I harbour bad thoughts about in our church?
- What did they do/say to make me feel that way
- How would I begin to move toward healing in this situation? What Paul does here is to say to the church leaders "I plead with you Help those who are in disagreement". This is for the health of the church.
- Can an unhealthy church honestly speak of being forgiven and reconciled to God when the members are not reconciled to one another?

Let's pray and ponder and ask God in all God's fullness to minister into our lives, our relationships and his church at Stanground. Amen