

When colleagues fall out

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Date: 14 February 2016

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[0 : 00] So we've been looking in this last week, this week and in a slightly different sense next week, this issue of unity and bearing in mind that famous verse from Ephesians 4 verse 3 make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.

That tells us among other things it doesn't just kind of happen, it's something you have to work at and that's what we're going to be looking at tonight.

And secondly let me just remind you that the verse I put on the screen there from 2 Timothy 3, we might perhaps have wished that this passage of scripture wasn't there at all.

But Paul reminds us that all scripture is God-breathed, all scripture is useful for teaching and rebuking and correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

So if all scripture is useful for teaching and so on, to equip the man of God, then this passage is also and so we shouldn't skip over it but rather we should have a look and see what it has to teach us.

[1 : 18] So I've sort of called this first bit the challenge of unity and I'd like to look at this passage from three respects. First of all ask why this incident is recorded at all.

Secondly ask how did the problem occur and say a bit about what the nature of the problem was. And thirdly we'll look at the solution and its aftermath and I'd like to suggest to you there is a solution here.

It may appear at first that there wasn't but I think there is actually a solution here and it's perhaps worth looking at it and seeing what the results.

We know a lot more of course about what happened afterwards and we can look at some of the writings of Paul and so on and see how this all worked out. So let's first of all ask the question why is this incident recorded here at all?

I just suggest to you that if you left out verses 37 to the beginning of 39 the narrative would still make sense. Let me just read it like that.

[2 : 26] Sometime later Paul said to Barnabas let's go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preach the word of the Lord and see how they're doing. They parted company Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus but Paul chose Silas and left commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.

You could leave out this bit about the disagreement and it would still make sense. You might think if only they had a decent spin doctor on the team. If only they had said look you could have presented this in a very positive light.

First time out it was just you and me Paul and Barnabas. But now look we can put two whole teams in the field. We don't you know God is at work here. And actually that wouldn't even have been a lie would it?

But it would have just been a subtle reworking of the truth. And yet Luke insists on telling us about this argument. And we might ask why is this?

We might say surely it can't be encouraging to the young churches to hear this news. Luke's certainly keen to tell us the good news. All that stuff about the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles.

[3 : 37] Peter's escape from prison. Even that tricky problem of circumcision that threatened to divide Jerusalem from Antioch seemed to have found an amicable settlement.

Why does he want to tell us the bad news? But he does. He tells us about the stoning of Stephen. He tells us about the death of James. And now we get this entirely uncharacteristic and unexpected confrontation between these two key leaders of the Antioch church.

And I'd suggest to you actually it's characteristic of the Bible, of the scriptures, to be sometimes almost brutally honest. Almost shockingly honest sometimes.

Just think of the record of the kings of Judah, for instance, that we find in the book of Kings and Chronicles. David, Solomon, Asa, Hezekiah.

Even in the scripture describes him as the best of the lot, Josiah. These are just the good kings. I've left out all the bad kings. These were the ones who were blessed by God in many ways.

[4 : 48] And yet all their failings and mistakes are meticulously recorded, aren't they? Even Josiah. How he got himself involved in an unfortunate alliance and got himself killed in the process.

And actually, if this generally wasn't true of the secular histories of that time of the ancient kings, for instance, you find there that just the good bits are recorded.

So Sennacherib reports on his successful siege of Lachish, but fails to tell us that he failed to take Jerusalem. That's the case unless the king was violently overthrown.

Of course, in that case, you get all the bad bits instead. You know, the history is written by the victors, as the saying goes. But the Bible never does that.

Scripture is always honest. Now think of the Gospels. Who were the natural leaders of the early church? Well, it was Peter the Rock and John the Son of Thunder.

[5 : 53] Just think if you know the Gospel stories. Who were the two people whose failings were recorded in the most precise details in the Gospels? It was Peter and John, wasn't it?

Peter, when he told Jesus that he couldn't go through with the crucifixion. And John, when he asked, could he and his brother sit at the Lord's right hand, are examples of that.

It's the failings of Peter and John, the two leaders of the early church, who have their failings most carefully recorded. And as I pointed out last week, we're always ready, aren't we, to quote that Ephesians 4, verse 3, about maintaining the unity of the Spirit.

But we're not so keen to quote that bit in Galatians about that public argument between Peter and Paul that took place in Antioch, where Barnabas somehow got caught in the crossfire.

The Bible does contain rebukes and warnings as well as good news. And often these warnings actually consist in pointing out the failures of the church or its leaders.

[6 : 57] Luke, remember, was a close associate and friend of Paul. He travelled with him for much of his later ministry. You would have thought if anybody would have taken, very much taken, Paul's side, it would have been Luke.

But he's absolutely honest here. He doesn't shrink from making this incident public. And he doesn't take sides in the argument. If anything, he seems to consider it a case of six or one and a half a dozen of the other, doesn't he?

Doesn't he? That's the impression you get from what he actually writes. So, no, they wouldn't have had a good spin doctor on the team, because Scripture never resorts to spin.

It has an entirely different view, even of encouragement. God uses Jeremiah as well as Elisha. We are encouraged by the good news, but we are also sometimes encouraged by the bad news.

If you're rather a sceptical, pessimistic person like I tend to be, you can easily neglect to give the good news and report on all those answers to prayer, which, of course, we should be doing.

[8 : 04] You can forget to rejoice in the Lord and give the glory to God. But we are also reminded that we have this treasure in jars of clay, that it's when we are weak that we are truly strong, 2 Corinthians 12, verse 10.

So Scripture is always balanced and honest, and it never resorts to spin. It always tells it like it is. So we have to ask ourselves the question, are we always the same, or do we try to cover things up?

Do we try to spin things sometimes? But Scripture never does that. So let's think now about how the problem might have occurred.

It's fairly easy to imagine the scene. It's described briefly in verses 36 to 38 there. And we can perhaps just fill in a few details for ourselves.

You can imagine it went something like this, I would think. Hi, Barnabas. Help yourself to the coffee and sandwiches. We need to get the team together for our next trip.

[9 : 11] I'm thinking we take Silas this time. And I've heard very good reports of this guy, Luke. We can pick him up en route. So what about you?

Have you got any suggestions? Barnabas says, yes, that sounds good. Let's give John Mark another chance, though. We should take him. What? No way. And with an innocent conversation

like that.

The conversation must have gone something like that. And years of friendship and cooperation and labour in the gospel are put to the test, aren't they? The unthinkable occurs in an unguarded moment.

The dream team is suddenly blown apart. It was Barnabas, remember, who had introduced Paul to the Jerusalem church when they had feared to take him in.

It was Barnabas and Paul who had set out on the first real missionary journey. They had preached together. They had escaped hostile crowds together.

[10:19] And in that council at Jerusalem, they had laboured side by side for the truth, resisting that attack on the gospel of grace. One might almost have said, as one says, sometimes the people, as if they were joined at the hip.

As if they were inseparable. And now on this seemingly not very important matter, they're unable to agree. You might ask the question, which of them is right and which of them is wrong?

I would suggest the answer actually is both and neither. Each is acting according to the character and wisdom that God has given them. Barnabas, remember, is the son of encouragement.

He's what we call a people person. He sees that Mark wants a second chance to show his mettle and is determined he shall have it. Barnabas and Mark were related, of course.

Colossians 4 verse 10 says that they're cousins. It may not actually mean first cousins. It can just mean sort of members of extended family rather than in the way that we know that Mary and Elizabeth were related.

[11:28] Although they may not have been first cousins. But certainly Barnabas and Mark are related. And Barnabas wants to take Mark under his wing. And Barnabas might have argued, well, Paul, I gave you a second chance, didn't I?

You were the one who persecuted the church. And yet I was the one who introduced you to the church in Jerusalem. Why can't you extend the same license to John Mark?

But Paul, Paul is rather more task orientated sort of guy, isn't he? He knows he's going into dangerous territory. He knows because he's already been there before. He can't afford a weak link in the team.

And actually, Paul seems to have been particularly sensitive about deserters. You read it in one or two of his letters. For instance, 2 Timothy 4 verse 10 says, For Demas, because he loved this world, had deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

In other passages, in other letters, Demas is recorded as one of those who sends greetings and so on. But it seemed that at this point, Demas had deserted Paul. Paul, whether forever or he came back, we don't know.

[12:41] But at this point, he seemed to have deserted Paul. And Paul was rather upset about it. But we'll read the next verse of this a bit later. Because it's quite interesting in this context.

But I'll save that for later. But Paul thinks that to take Mark with them is unwise. Because he had deserted them last time. So who's right or wrong? In the end, this is just a matter of judgment, isn't it?

Of balancing priorities. There's no clear theological principle at stake here. You need to make up your own mind. There is something really quite surprising here.

And that is what Luke does not say. It doesn't say that he asked the church or the other leaders to pray, does it? Did they not ask for some prophetic word?

For some specific guidance from the Holy Spirit? It's kind of hard to imagine that they didn't. But perhaps they didn't.

[13:42] Perhaps they just got too hot under the collar over it. Or perhaps they did, but no word was received. Perhaps the word was just sorted out yourself. They received at least no clear answer.

Luke just tells us broadly. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. And with that, the dream team is broken up. So let's see, is there a solution to this problem?

And again, I'd like to break that down into three questions. Because at first, it seems there is no solution. If you just read it briefly, you would think that was the case. But I think actually there is.

We would prefer that these situations do not arise. But of course, all of us are imperfect people. We all belong to an imperfect church. And we all live in an imperfect world.

I think it was Spurgeon, wasn't it? He said, if you find a perfect church, don't join it. Because you'll spoil it. But in the real world, we have to deal with these problems, not wish they'd go away. [14:51] And perhaps there's more practical wisdom to be found here, if we dig in a little bit, than is immediately apparent. Suppose one finds oneself in such a conflict. Or perhaps one is counselling someone who's in such a situation.

Then how could we go about it? Well, because I don't know exactly how Paul and Barnabas went about it. But I think it might have been something like this. They might have asked themselves these three questions.

Is it vital to win the argument here? Is it right to maintain the relationship? And what is in the best interests of the kingdom? So let's see how the behaviour of Paul and Barnabas addresses these questions.

And then look at the outcome. So the first question is, is it vital to win the argument? And the NIV actually is quite helpful here, because it brings out the fact that chapter 15 verse 39 is different from chapter 15 verse 2.

Chapter 15 verse 2. This is the circumcision question, of course, that we looked at last week. This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.

[16:16] What happened there was a dispute and a debate. A heated debate, certainly. But it was a debate in which the questions were raised and discussed. And there were arguments put forward and presumably arguments demolished.

And that is what the Greek says. This sharp dispute in sharp disagreement in verse 39 is actually a different Greek word.

Excuse my pronunciation. It's a bit difficult. But it's something like paroxysmos. From which I guess we get the word paroxysm. And it means a sharp contention, an irritation, a quarrel, or a spat, really.

It's not the same as a debate or a dispute. It's a contention. In chapter 15 verses 1-2 with the circumcision issue, it was indeed vital to win the argument.

The very nature of the gospel and the unity of the church was under attack. But often these disputes are over a very minor theological issue or not even that, as seems to be the case here.

[17:35] Simply a matter of taste or judgment. Paul and Barnabas were clearly not going to agree on this issue. But they were united in spirit.

And so they had to find a way forward to maintain that unity. There was not a theological disagreement here. There was no theological reason to separate. It was simply a matter of taste or judgment.

And secondly, we could ask, is it right to maintain the relationship? Now at first sight, you might think the answer to that was always yes. After all, church isn't Christianity about relationships. But actually, of course, there are times when the scripture says it's not right to maintain the relationship. And I just put a couple of verses up on the screen here.

The first one is from John, that great apostle of love. And he wrote in 1 John 5, 16, Remarkably strong statement, actually.

[18:50] I'm not going to go in detail as to exactly what he meant by it. But he's surely at least saying, sometimes the sin is so grave that one can't sort of treat it in an ordinary way.

There is a sin that leads to death. Or perhaps a bit easier to understand this verse that Paul himself wrote in 1 Corinthians 5, 11. Now I'm writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother, but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler, which such a man do not even eat.

Obviously, the italics I put on the screen there are mine. But I think they bring out the point that sometimes it is right to break off a relationship.

But that, of course, is for moral reasons, if there is some major sin involved. So, in a sense, the answer to the first question, do we have to win the argument?

The answer here is no. There is no fundamental theological disagreement here. It is just a matter of judgment. And then we could ask the question, is there some major sin or moral issue here for which separation is necessary?

[20:13] And again, of course, in this case, the answer is no. Neither was accusing the other of being involved in some sin. If there was any moral failure at all, it was only that of Mark himself.

And that was a fairly minor thing. And Paul certainly wasn't saying that Mark should have been put out of the church. He was just saying that maybe he wasn't totally reliable.

Clearly, these verses that I put on the screen there and just read relate to extreme cases of misconduct, don't they? Paul and Barnabas were in a very different situation.

If they stayed together, then one of them at least was going to have this question gnawing at the back of their mind. It was going to be undermining their long-standing friendship and cooperation. And in fact, I might suggest to you that the best way here to preserve their relationship might have been to be exactly what they did.

[21 : 20] To separate. That way the quarrel could cool and their mutual trust and their mutual esteem were going to survive.

And we'll look at that again in a bit more detail in a minute. Within a local church, of course, separation might not be practical. But you can apply the same principle.

Sometimes you just need to find an accommodation. Sometimes you just need to find a compromise that will work. Sometimes you need to find a way forward that diffuses the issue and preserves the relationship.

And that's likely to involve compromise on both parties. And the third question that really overrides all other questions in one sense is, what is in the best interest of the kingdom?

Because after all, that's what it's all about. But the trouble is with that question like that, it can be a bit like the Bible is for Christian unity. It's obviously true, but what does it mean in practice?

[22 : 31] And that can be quite difficult to define. So I thought it was worth looking at two passages of Jesus' own teaching that relate to what is in the best interest of the kingdom and of the church when it particularly refers to this question of disagreement or some hurt in the church.

And the first one is from the Sermon on the Mount, but I'll read the Luke version here. Luke 6, 30 to 31. So the first principle there is that, you know, sometimes just be prepared to accept a wrong. And you might think that was always the case were it not for the fact, if you look at something else that Jesus said on this subject. And we find that in Matthew 18, and I put up on the screen there again, verses 15 to 17.

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault. And I will say here, I think, you know, the suggestion here is it's a fault. It's not a great, you know, great major thing.

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault just between the two of you. And if he listens to you, you run your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

[24 : 07] And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. So there is, maybe it's more than a fault, because there is that separation at the end.

Jesus said both those things. And we need to perhaps keep both these things in mind when we're dealing with issues of this sort.

The point here is not one of fanatic obedience. It's not one of complete disregard of self-interest. Because if you do that, then all sorts of nasty results can occur. And we'll think about that in a minute. But the point is that it's the kingdom values of justice and peace and service that should be exemplified.

And that makes it a bit easier, makes it a bit more able to use this principle in practice. If we ask ourselves, how can we best serve the kingdom?

[25 : 20] And if you ask the question in that way, you may come up with a slightly different answer, as Paul and Barnabas seem to have done here. And so I can point out to you here that Paul and Barnabas had the same priorities, same kingdom priorities.

In fact, it's more specific than that. In verse 36, Luke tells us that they'd both had in mind to strengthen the churches.

They were going to go and visit the places where they'd preached and see how the churches were getting on. And that was their kingdom priority. And if they couldn't do that together, then they would do it separately.

And Luke doesn't spin this as fielding two teams instead of one. But on the other hand, that was actually the outcome. Sometimes God uses even our failings to bring about a good outcome.

But that doesn't mean we should ignore our failings and say that God will sort it out anyway. We need to... Somebody waiting there. Somebody like to go. There are people out there.

[26 : 33] Somebody want to go. See what it is. I'm sorry. Luke does not spin this as a...

Sorry. Sometimes God uses even our failings to bring about a good outcome. But that doesn't mean we should ignore our failings.

We need to be active and deal with them. And so what was the outcome? How did this application of a bit of real world wisdom find a practical solution?

How did it pan out in the end? Well, we can say quite a lot about that because we know a lot about the people involved. Luke was a close associate of Paul, as we've said.

And he might have been expected to take Paul's side. Yet when he came to write his account, and one must assume he actually wrote it down after these events.

[27 : 33] What did he say about Barnabas in Acts 11.25? He said, Barnabas was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and faith. He wasn't in any way prejudiced against Barnabas.

He understood what a good man Barnabas was. Whatever the rights and wrongs of that particular argument, there can be no doubt that Barnabas was spot on in his assessment of his young relative, John Mark.

After all, remember, this was the same John Mark who wrote Mark's Gospel. If he hadn't been given a second chance, we wouldn't have Mark's Gospel. But actually, we don't even have to make that inference because we can leave the last word on John Mark to Paul.

We've already noted Paul's distress at his desertion of Demas as he wrote to Timothy. And what does he write in the very next sentence? He writes, only Luke is with me.

Get Mark and bring him with you. Because he is helpful to me in my ministry. Somewhere along the line, Paul had changed his mind. Far from wanting to leave Mark behind.

[28 : 47] He wanted Mark with him there in that very difficult situation. Probably in prison or in some other difficult position. So let's finish with a suitable thought for Valentine's Day.

I thought Phil had one this morning. I thought I'd have one as well. And that's the following. Well, you may be aware that in the book of Esther, the name of God is never mentioned.

And yet the hand of God runs all the way through the book of Esther. Well, you may not have noticed this. But in the book of Acts, the word love is never mentioned.

And yet it's all about love for the brothers, isn't it? There was a recent study, actually, that showed that married couples who never fight, who appear to have a kind of perfect relationship, are actually less likely to stay together than those who have the occasional spat, the occasional quarrel.

And actually, if you think about it, it's not too hard to see why that would be. If married couples never have any sort of quarrel or disagreement, it probably means one of two things.

[30 : 08] Either there's no passion there in the first place and they just don't care, and they just go on leading their own lives, separate lives under one roof. Or if it's not that, it means that they're burying their resentments.

And if they're doing that, then eventually that's going to destroy the relationship, isn't it? And to some extent, I think that same principle applies to churches.

This very spat that they had was one that was created by love because they were brothers who had worked together so much. If that weren't the case, it wouldn't have happened.

They would have just carried on in their own way and not come into confrontation over it. The love of Barnabas for his protege, Mark.

The love of Paul for his saviour and his appointed task. And the love that they both had for the new churches. They certainly had that in common. And indeed the love that they had for each other.

[31 : 12] And I would suggest that there is a solution here. If it was created by love, it was solved by love. Maintaining love depends on forgiveness. And you can't actually forgive unless you acknowledge there is an issue.

If you just bury the resentment, then that in the end will destroy love. But if you acknowledge that there is an issue, then it is possible to forgive then, isn't it?

Ideally, the issue should be acknowledged by both parties, but sometimes that's not possible.

Sometimes you even have to do it unilaterally. But I think you do have to acknowledge that there is an issue, not bury it.

And then you can forgive and find a way forward. So I thought I'd finish with this hymn about love.

One that we often sing.