

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Some Problems Christians Face: Conflict - How can it be resolved?

This morning I would like to consider the problem of conflict between Christians. We can be in no doubt from the ministry of the Lord Jesus in John 17 that He intended the unity of His church to be a witness to the world of the love of God.

"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me." (John 17:20-23)

How was that going to happen? I think we have the clearest demonstration of it after Pentecost in Acts 2:41-47. The early Church for a brief time turned the world upside down. "Then those who gladly received his word were baptised; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."

The early Church was marked by the love of God. It permeated through every aspect of their lives fulfilling the words of the Lord Jesus, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35).

However by the time we reach Acts 6 the first contention arises in the Church. "Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:1-4).

This is an interesting passage for several reasons. The cause of the contention was just, widows were being neglected. That is one of the characteristic features of all conflict. One party often has a just cause and, equally as often, the other party feels their cause is also justified. And so the scene is set for confrontation. The question then arises as to how the problem can be settled justly and the relationships, which have been endangered, preserved.

The next thing we notice about the conflict over the widows is the reaction of the apostles. It seems on the face of it a very spiritual one. "We must continue to get on with spiritual matters. You find some able men to resolve the problem." In others words, sort it out yourselves. Was this true spiritual leadership? I may be misjudging the apostles but let's go back to another incident of conflict which directly involved the same apostles. There was a conflict between the disciples about which of them would be the greatest at the Lord's Supper. John 13 records how Jesus arose from the table to wash the disciples' feet to give them a vivid picture of true greatness - the willingness to serve one another in love. The Lord did not ignore the contention the disciples were having about their greatness or delegate its solution to another. By lowliness and love He gave them the example of service. "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15). I have a suspicion that in the Acts the apostles had overlooked their Master's simple but difficult example of leadership by serving. Christlikeness is about the life of Christ seen in me at times of conflict. In the words of the song, "Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me."

However, the judgement of the apostles did please the early Church and seven able men became willing servants. It has always struck me that of these seven who took on the simple work of, in the apostles words, "serving tables", Stephen became the first martyr of the Church and Philip the only man in Scripture given the title of Evangelist (Acts 7:59 and 21:8). It demonstrates to us that when we are willing to walk in Christ's steps He will honour our service.

The final thing about this first conflict in the Church is that it was resolved by spiritual men - men who were willing to sort the problem out and ensure everyone was dealt with fairly. This was able to happen because the church which was willing to submit to spiritual counsel. This is important. When problems arise between believers we often react as most people in the world would. We struggle to have our cause heard. We insist on our rights being upheld. We look for sympathisers, people who will take sides. And, sadly, we put distance between those who will not take our side. We become entrenched. Brothers and sisters who have trusted Christ and preached reconciliation all their Christian lives suddenly become irreconcilable.

When we find ourselves in a situation of conflict, it is sometimes the wisest course to give place to those fighting against us and allow God the opportunity to resolve the difficulty for us. An example of this is Abraham and his nephew Lot. They were both rich men with lots of cattle. They lived close together. Too close!

“Lot also, who went with Abram, had flocks and herds and tents. Now the land was not able to support them that they might dwell together, for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abraham’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock. The Canaanites and the Perizzites then dwelt in the land. So Abram said to Lot, “Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. “Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left.” And Lot lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere (before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah) like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go toward Zoar. Then Lot chose for himself all the plain of Jordan, and Lot journeyed east. And they separated from each other.” (Genesis 13:5-11)

The way Abraham deals with this problem is very striking. As the elder and richer man, he did not press for advantage but took the lower place and allowed Lot to choose what seemed the best of the land. What would we have done? Asserted our rights? Fought our corner and negotiated a settlement to our advantage? Left the fellowship because we could not get our own way? Stopped speaking to brothers and sisters we once loved?

Abraham was a man of faith. He simply believed that by trusting in God his way in life would be blessed. He was willing to suffer loss but have God on his side.

So often there is a general unwillingness amongst Christians to bear suffering and possible injustice and so follow Christ. Yet this is what the Scriptures teach us is part of our calling and testimony to Christ. “For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Peter 2:20-23).

Ghandi mocked Christianity by saying he would have liked to become a Christian but had never met one. When we read Peter’s words, we can see the point Ghandi makes. How willing am I to suffer injustice and by it witness a Christlike character?

There was once a Christian farmer who noticed that every so often one of his chickens would disappear. This carried on for some time until one night he saw his neighbour taking a chicken. He was not sure what to do. So he went home and told his wife. “Don’t worry,” she said, “leave it to me.” The next day she went down to the hen house and picked one of the best hens, took it home, plucked it and made a beautiful chicken pie. That night she went along to her neighbours and presented the pie to them for supper. It led not only to the spiritual conviction of their neighbour but his conversion to Christ. Conflict is often not resolved because it is met with force rather than the grace of Christ.

But you might be asking, surely there are times when problems between believers need to be sorted out in a direct way, and you would be right. The Lord Jesus gives us some clear help in Matthew 18:15-17, “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector”.

The emphasis is placed on the person wronged to approach the person who wronged them. The spirit in which this is done is critical. And we get general guidance in another Scripture, Galatians 6:1: “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.” Approaching others over difficult matters has to be undertaken in a spiritual and gracious way. So often problems between Christians are seldom because of one issue but an accumulation of many. It is only when we are

able to quietly and openly sit down and discuss our difficulties that we can begin to deal with them. This needs prayer, honesty and a willingness to genuinely forgive.

The Lord anticipated that sometimes the person we approach may not respond as we had hoped. In such circumstances, other spiritual Christians need to be involved to act as witnesses and help the process of reconciliation. Finally, the Church has to make a judgement and act. Today we live in a world which does not easily submit to authority of any kind. As Christians we are expected by God to recognise the mistakes we make, take steps to put them right, and submit to the spiritual counsel of fellow Christians. Sadly, this course is often resisted and consequently conflict is not resolved.

It is always a happy thing when someone recognises their faults and seeks to put the matter right. Proverbs 18:19 tells us, "A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a castle." So we need to tread carefully. On the other side we have to play our part and be willing and ready to accept the apology of fellow Christians.

Paul analyses the problem of an unwillingness to be reconciled to each other in 1 Corinthians 6. "Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life? If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated? No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and you do these things to your brethren!"

Paul powerfully exposes the dreadful behaviour of some Christians in conflict with each other. The reasons for conflict may have been business relationships or family relationships. It is immaterial. Paul accepts that conflicts between Christians occur but that they must be dealt with within the fellowship of God's people. Today people quickly go to the law courts to defend themselves. It is a growth industry. But Paul insists that difficulties between Christians should be settled in the Church, and that submitting to wise spiritual advice is the key to this. He further argues that it is better to suffer loss than to go to court before unbelievers. This is not because non-Christian courts may be unjust but because of the shame brought to the Christian witness. How can Christ's redeemed people who have known and preached to the world reconciliation to God be unable to be reconciled to each other? How could those who taught the love of God then tell the world they are no longer able to love one another? It is a mockery of our faith to preach the forgiveness of Christ but refuse to forgive each other and God is not mocked. Such behaviour allows the world to call to question the power and nobility of the cross and brings the Christian testimony into disrepute.

It seems today that we are in danger of losing sight of true Christianity - following Christ. It is a pathway Christ never deceived us about. He said it would involve service and suffering. And the real proof of faith is its demonstration when things go wrong and become difficult and painful.

Last year at a young people's conference in Germany I was asked to speak about marriage. There were a large number of couples who were contemplating marriage or were already married. At the end of the meeting I took them through the English marriage vows and reminded them of what it is to make a lifelong commitment to another person before God and the demands it places upon us. But we have also made a lifelong commitment to Christ. He has saved and will keep us to the end but we are responsible to live out the demands of His love in our lives. This is never more true than in our relationships between fellow believers because it is the love which exists between us which shows the world that we are Christ's disciples.

The Christian fellowship is a family so there are always going to be family problems. They come in all forms - personality clashes, jealousies, lack of consideration, taking each other for granted, failing to value one another - the list goes on. Even spiritual leaders have their disagreements and God gave us an outstanding example of such a problem. It involved two of the most outstanding servants of Christ - Paul and Barnabas. John Mark, the nephew of Barnabas, was a bright young Christian at the very centre of the early church. He became one of the first missionaries with Paul and Barnabas. But he found the mission field a hard place and returned to Jerusalem. Paul refused to take him on his second missionary journey because he had failed in service and Paul felt Mark was unreliable. So a disagreement between two great men of God arose. Was blood thicker than water and clouding the judgement of Barnabas in regard to his young nephew? How often do we take the side of our children or those near to us rather than being objective and "speaking the truth love". Many Christians need to learn that, in dealing with fellow Christians who are our relations, we have to be faithful to God's word rather than family ties. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend".

On the other hand, was Paul being too harsh and lacking in Christian compassion by not giving his young friend a second chance? We need to learn to give our fellow believers fresh opportunities when failure has occurred. God has been so gracious to us - how gracious are we to each other? When our fellow believers turn to us for forgiveness and want to put things right we must respond in grace and with open arms and hearts.

I do not know the rights and wrongs of the conflict between Paul and Barnabas. I only know that Barnabas took John Mark to Cyprus and by his pastoral care helped his young nephew. So that, at the end of Paul's writings in 2 Timothy, we see John Mark restored and Paul commending him with affection as a useful servant of God. The conflict was eventually resolved. This is an important lesson. It takes time to heal rifts and we have to be patient and loving towards each other whilst confidence is being restored.

Many years ago I fell out with an older Christian about family related issues. I took him to task and spoke very harshly to him in front of others. I believed I was in the right. Our relationship was at great risk. The next time we met was the prayer meeting and we sat stony faced on opposite sides of the room. The atmosphere was depressed and the whole company unhappy. There was only one course of action. I began the meeting by apologising to the dear brother for the way I had spoken to him and trusted that we could put the incident behind us. His response was immediate - the matter was closed and we began our prayer meeting with free, open and thankful hearts.

This morning, how many of us will go into our fellowship bearing grievances or grudges against those for whom Christ died? Let us make this a day when we resolve to put right the conflicts which rob us of peace and power and, by loving one another as Christ loved us, show to the world what it is to be true disciples of the Lord Jesus.

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