

Spiritual Check-Up

Acts 15:36-41

Central Idea: The diversity within Christ's body must be subject to the unity of Jesus' mission.

Introduction

Recently, we gathered a group together to do a VBS day at the church. We began planning and everyone had great ideas. But when it came time to begin producing things like the flyer for the event and some other things, we found that there this great diversity was becoming more disunity than unity. We ended up cancelling the event. This could be taken as a failure, but I refuse to allow it to stand as such. I believe that we can learn from our mistakes and God can use us in even greater ways.

As a pastor, I always feel the pull to put the best possible spin on each event, even when it doesn't go extremely well or when something like this happens. What I'm finding is that many Christians are the same way. We don't long for confusion or confrontation. And we shouldn't. But even in the early Church, there were sharp disagreements. I want to see how the Bible teaches us to handle disagreements within the Body of Christ by believers this morning, so that we can be placed in the Potter's hands and healing between brothers and sisters in Christ can begin.

It is no surprise that we will be sharing in the Lord's table in just a little bit either. It seems that God has allowed this event so that we can do some looking under the spiritual hood of our souls today, and some in-house cleaning. It's so easy to follow our desire to sweep confrontation under the rug, but thanks to the Holy Spirit, some great friends and a wonderful mentor, I refuse to ignore the little foxes that Satan wishes to use to bring disunity to this Body. Let's take a look at a similar account in Acts 15.

Text – Acts 15:36-41

³⁶ And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."³⁷ Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.³⁸ But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.³⁹ And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus,⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

- I. There is room for disagreements in the family of God.

- A. Diversity means that we will have different ideas.
- i. We were not designed to all be the same. In fact, Paul tells us when he talks about the Church as the Body of Christ, that we are all different types of members with different types of gifts.
 - ii. Sometimes, the differences between us clash, and it was no different in the New Testament! People have personality clashes, idea clashes, cultural clashes, and a host of other barriers to unity.
 - iii. Even Paul had problems with other Christians. This man named John-Mark most likely wrote the Gospel of Mark, but for some reason, Paul found him less than effective in the missionary field.
 - iv. He and Barnabas go at it in this passage we have read today over whether or not to include John-Mark in the new missionary journey they are about to start.
 - v. In case we were to think this is a small deal, Luke tells us that it was a “very sharp disagreement,” incredibly strong language to describe their differences, and it was so sharp that they parted ways!
 - vi. These are two giants of the faith involved in the front lines of missionary work for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and their argument is so strong that it separates them and they head off in two directions.
 - vii. We’d love to smooth over that part of church history, talking about how God used that event to double the groups of missionaries in the field, Paul’s group and Barnabas’s group, but that’s not what happened.
 - viii. What we actually have here is the clashing of different personalities and mindsets as to the mission field. It’s that plain and simple. When you have such a diverse group, you will have disagreements.
 - ix. **Application:** I thank God that He has foreseen that we will not always get along so well with one another, and that there will be disagreements amongst us. God does not tell us that there can’t be disagreement, but that there can’t be divisions among us. So our disagreements must not divide us! That sounds like a tall order! But if we are obedient to the Holy Spirit, He will work these things out among us.
- B. Diversity means that we are a body and not a collection of the same part.
- i. Diversity in the church is quite a challenge, because the Bible does not call us to be the same. It calls us to be different, and diversity is seen as a positive by God.
 - ii. Our unique personality, gifting, talents, and person is what God wants to use to make the most impact on the world. Paul talks about the Church as a body in 1 Corinthians 12, each member doing its distinct ability well.

- iii. The church does not need clones. It needs unique individuals who add their own flavor to the whole of the soup of God's Church. Because of this, there can be disagreements, but there must still be unity.
 - iv. This is not the only disagreement in the early Church. In fact, there are several. For instance, Paul takes both the Corinthian and Galatian churches to task for their wrong theology and practices.
 - v. Beyond this, he opposes Peter publicly in Galatians 2 because Peter is favoring Jewish Christians in front of Gentile Christians, which would have brought division among cultural lines.
 - vi. Our diverse viewpoints, thought processes, cultural backgrounds and perspectives can be a great help to God's Kingdom in finding new ways to minister to the world, but these can also cause disunity in the Body.
 - vii. The call is for strong and effective leadership to help those with disagreements to work together. Without biblical leadership, the body is pulled in many directions at once.
 - viii. I am blessed by this passage in Acts about Paul and Barnabas disagreeing because I read toward the end of Paul's life, in 2 Timothy 4:9-13 that Paul in his old age close to death for the gospel calls on Timothy to send, of all people, John-Mark to him, because he is very useful to Paul.
 - ix. Despite the sharp disagreement in the ministry with Barnabas, Paul has changed his mind and heart toward John-Mark, and the disagreement they had early in ministry is no longer an issue.
 - x. **Application:** Although God works through leaders in His church to help people in their unique diversity to be unified in the Spirit and in body, He best uses His Word and His Holy Spirit to bring people to a place of evaluating themselves before Him to discover how they can be united to serve Him better. We must always be sensitive to God's Spirit and obediently open to His evaluation above all else!
- II. How we deal with one another in disagreement is the key.
- A. We must be humble, peaceable and loving in our disagreements.
 - i. So how then should we properly deal with conflicts among us? We have seen that they are bound to happen because of our diversity. But how do we pursue unity?
 - ii. There are more than a few helpful words in Scripture for dealing with conflict at any time, but especially within the diverse body of Christ. Paul in Romans 12:9-21, right after the image of being a united body with diverse parts, calls us to continually be evaluating our relationships with other believers.

- iii. The Holy Spirit calls us to be humble in our dealings with other Christians, to put others first before ourselves. He calls us to be genuine and peaceable.
 - iv. He calls us to outdo one another with honor. He calls us to overcome evil with good. It is so easy when we allow fractures to form and let them fester for Satan to sow seeds of disunity.
 - v. We don't want to create an environment where God's Spirit cannot move amongst us because none of us is sensitive to Him and His will. Don't allow Satan to have a foothold among us. If at all possible, live in peace with one another.
 - vi. These are the moments when pride rears its ugly head, where we think that other people are at fault. The fact of the matter is it matters not who started it or who is at fault. The result is still the same: division, strife and unforgiveness.
 - vii. We must be obedient to God and repent from our pride, our sense of indignation or of whose fault this or that is. Is our arrogance worth the passing of the Holy Spirit's presence to those who are more open to Him?
- B. The world will know us by our love for one another.
- i. Beyond this, our Christian witness is also endangered by our pride and by wronging one another, or not being able to resolve our conflicts in a way that honors God.
 - ii. Disunity becomes a drain on the effectiveness of the Church to win the world to Christ. When people in the world come into God's house, they will simply find the same thing they already know in the world.
 - iii. Our ability to work together in peace and unity affects our witness to the world. They are watching. They notice when these things happen, and the problem is that they misread our disobedience for Christianity being hypocritical.
 - iv. We can gravely injure our witness when we cannot dwell in unity together. We cannot work on a project that would advance God's Kingdom. We cannot serve one another if we are at enmity with each other.
 - v. We can't even pray for one another or fellowship, because the very word fellowship means to share things in common. But we are not sharing Christ in common when we cannot be obedient to His teachings and Spirit.
 - vi. Jesus tells us that the world will know us as His disciples when we love one another (John 13:34-35). We are called to do our very best to address disputes so that God can continue to be glorified in us individually and as His Church.
- C. We must follow God's principles for disagreements.

- i. Jesus saw this coming. Adversity and disunity and fracturing are not new to Him. He addresses this issue of conflict and gives us a method for dealing with one another in love.
- ii. We can find that method in Matthew 18:15-20. There is a three step process for the Church as we deal with sin and disagreement and disunity. God set this in place for these types of situations, and we must make this our go-to operation in such a situation.
- iii. First, we are to individually go to the person that we have offended, or whom has offended us. This does not involve anyone else but you, another person, and God. That's it.
- iv. So often we want to share our offenses with others so they can be angry and judgmental with us, but we are called to address one another in love and grace, and not drag others into our conflict.
- v. That first step should be all that is needed, but there are sometimes when personalities do not get along and people may not listen to the Holy Spirit, in which case, step two calls for you to get a mediator.
- vi. This would usually be a pastor or elder, and allow them to counsel, hear the case, pray about the issue and seek Godly wisdom in it, and then offer resolution to the conflict.
- vii. If this does not work, because Jesus knows just how stubborn we all can be, He has arranged for us to take it before the whole church. In that case, the decision of the body would be final.
- viii. This three step process is not meant to be regularly gone through. In other words, it's designed for the hardest of hearts, not one who is open to God's Spirit and will.
- ix. When we practice this method of resolving conflicts in our diverse group, God's Spirit is glorified, we are restored to unity and God can effectively use us for His purposes!

D. We must live in harmony as much as it is possible.

- i. Finally, we are called to live at peace with one another. Though we may have disagreements and conflicts with one another from time to time, there needs to be a deeper sense of friendship and comradery.
- ii. This goes beyond the minor conflicts that may arise for whatever reason, personality differences, cultural differences, misunderstandings, unclear communication, or whatever the case may be.
- iii. This is a deep-seated love for one another, a common thread of being on the same team, of being for one another and fellowshiping with one another.
- iv. Even Paul was able to welcome John-Mark back into his good graces! Some conflicts seem so deep that they are hard to address. But if we can't

forgive one another and resolve our differences, then the healing of these wounds will never start.

- v. Harmony is an interesting call for the Church to have. It is a unity with a diversity. In harmony, two different pitches come together to produce a more full, vibrant and beautiful sound.
- vi. It is my hope as pastor that this message will not just minister to our immediate need today, but that it will set the stage for how we deal with one another on a regular basis.
- vii. When I don't hear of people utilizing these God-given methods to resolve conflicts in the Church, I am greatly saddened. God took the time to give us ways to get along. Let's use these ways!
- viii. We must always approach one another in love, in humility, with a kind attitude and a willingness to hear each other and respond in complete love. This must be the basis for conflict resolution. The process itself is not what makes the conflict subside, but the love in which it is done.

Conclusion

I realize this morning that this message may seem aimed at our most recent issue in VBS. But this is not just about one ministry. This is about all of us every day and the fellowship we must have, the unity that must be here. How can we expect to hear from God and be used of God mightily if we cannot resolve our conflicts and enjoy the diversity of the body while coming under the headship of Christ in unity?

I believe that the Holy Spirit has given me this message today especially. I see the issue of VBS as an open door to demonstrate forgiveness, love and unity. This should be a learning experience for us as a church. If you are angry with me for "reading your mail" this morning, I want to assure you of three points:

First, the Holy Spirit is reading your mail and forwarding it to me.

Second, I rarely preach based off of the problems I hear in our church. I tend to deal with them privately, but this is a corporate issue and even those who do not have conflict can learn from it.

Third, if I did not address this issue in our church, you would be angry with me for not leading us into an understanding and practice of God's Word. So I humbly submit to you that this message is what is needed for us today.

Our communion time is going to be different today. You may notice that we did not have prayer either. Now is a special time of prayer for each of us. I struggled with how to allow us to apply this message today, and here is what I hear the Spirit telling us to do. We will get into prayer groups of three or four as we have done before. If you have a conflict of any kind with anyone, take this time of prayer to go to each other and resolve it.

There is a word of caution here, though. 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that unconditional love keeps no record of wrongs. Not one of us in this room should be watching who is going where. We each must consider our own selves, not others. Please listen to the Holy Spirit!

After we are done in prayer, we will have communion, so I will read to you two Scriptures to prepare us for prayer and the Lord's Table, and then open the church for prayer groups: Matthew 5:23-24 and 1 Corinthians 11:

Action Points

- Diversity can advance God's Kingdom, but disunity destroys our witness and effectiveness as His Body.
- Every Christian must obediently pursue and listen to the Holy Spirit, for He will evaluate each of us and tell us how we can be unified even in disagreements.
- Are you doing everything in your power, and in the Spirit's power, to be at peace with your brothers and sisters in Christ? What more could you do?
- If an unbeliever visited our church today, would they see our love for one another, or would we be more comfortable if they weren't here to see this?
- Am I following the three steps for conflict resolution from Matthew 18:15-20?