

Unity, But Not Utopia, In The Local Church

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God's people need to be taught, not only how to appropriate the promises, enjoy God's presence, and to obey the Lord, but also how to be realistic and prepared for inevitable conflicts in their own lives and in the life of a local church from time to time. Absolutely... God commands believers to live together in harmony, and we should all strive for that! However, to place an unrealistic expectation on any church that there can never be any conflict or something must be wrong with that church if it occurs, is not wise. Controversy and disagreement is part of living on this sin-fallen earth. Inevitably, problems between people DO arise. Power struggles DO happen... in every local church from time to time. We should pray against these things from happening, so as to minimize conflict and strife. But invariably they will happen in every church. Even Solomon in all his wisdom wrote, "Cast out the scorner, and contention and strife shall cease!" Dr. Mike Murdock states, "Strife is usually proof that someone does not belong." He also makes this observation: "Those who are dissatisfied with many of your decisions are capable of eventually betraying you."

Over the years I have heard many saints say something similar to this: *"Well, I just don't want anything to do with church politics. I hate church politics. Why does there have to be politics in the church?"* I agree; I don't like strife and discord either! God is not the author of it; people are! But we should look more carefully at this statement because buried in this catch-all phrase concerning "church politics" are some fallacies. Fallacy number one is that all disagreement is just "politics." However, if we applied this to our marriages and families, we would have long time ago walked out on our spouse and children just to avoid any "politics." When a parent disciplines their child, it is not just an act of politics. It is rather an act of discipline for the child's benefit and also for the preservation and peace of the entire family unit. Mike Murdock also says, "Confrontation is an attempt to preserve a relationship, not to destroy it." Fallacy number two is that all order and all government is just mere "politics." But the Bible states the contrary, declaring, "The powers which be are ordained of God." Fallacy number three is the underlying assumption that all conflict is bad, regardless of the reason for the conflict. But the truth is that conflict often occurs because something holy and right is being challenged and is thus worth defending. Fallacy number four is the underlying pie-in-the-sky thinking that humans should never have problems with one another. But until Jesus returns this state of utopia cannot and will not occur. The book of Ecclesiastes says there is a time for everything, even conflict (war)! Peace comes at a cost... always!

Football teams, baseball teams, and sports teams of all sorts REORGANIZE from time to time. Corporations often make staff changes and workforce personnel changes in order to be effective. This is part of life. And it is part of Kingdom life too. For the sake of a local church's effectiveness, personnel changes have to be made from time to time. Often it is because a person who started well goes sour over time, or their vision changes from the church's vision. Or perhaps God has something for them elsewhere that they have failed to recognize. Maybe the church has outgrown someone's skills set. Sometimes it is because an under-leader is having a difficult time remaining a team player. Sometimes it is because of deep-seated disrespect and familiarity. Many times it is only because a church or team has limited financial resources.

We should not be shocked at all when disagreements come up from time to time in a local church. Satan wants to shock and surprise us. That is one of his tactics. *"I can't believe this kind of thing could happen between Christians."* This is precisely the reaction the devil desires. But it is immature and utopia-thinking that conflict would never arise in the house of God. Of course conflicts arise. Why? One reason is that all people change over time. Another reason is that our goals change. Often it is because organizations have to change, not necessarily because the change is either right or wrong, but because change is demanded of them. Without change an organization becomes irrelevant and dies. Sometimes it's because someone is not keeping themselves sweet and broken before the Lord and has developed a Jezebel spirit, an Absalom spirit, a Sheba spirit, or some other divisive attitude.

THIS I HAVE LEARNED: Immature sheep want nothing to do with conflict. Even if they are loyal to the leader, they just want all conflict to go away. So if they feel they cannot get the conflict to go away, THEY GO AWAY! This of course, plays right into the devil's hand as he is waiting outside the doors to catch those lone sheep who have now taken his bait, and placed themselves outside the protection and warmth of the shepherd and flock. DIVIDE AND CONQUER has always been the devil's M.O... and he's had plenty of time to practice and perfect his strategy! All of us are easily hood-winked by this strategy without the Lord's help.

So how does a believer deal with conflict when it arises in a local church? Leave and go to another church which will, in time, prove to be imperfect too? Throw up one's hands and abandon God's idea and dream of the local church? Everlastingly feel torn between the opposing views of two parties? The answer to all these questions is a resounding "NO!" The real answer is simple: 1) *Stay put*, 2) *Pray*, 3) *Don't listen to rumors from anyone, and*, 4) *Stick with the God-ordained leader of that local church*. Even if it be emotionally charged, conflict is but temporary! It "came to pass." We cannot be controlled by the emotion of a moment. A believer should rally around the man of God that the Lord placed in charge of protecting that flock. There is due order to everything. There exists divine protocol in every environment and organization, just like there is due order in the family unit. We would find it hard to imagine a wife leaving her husband just because one of the children disagreed with him. That is not a solution; that would be a problem on top of a problem.

Sometimes in a local church someone becomes unhappy with the leader because the leader may not always let them have their own way. (Why can't we all realize that if we get our own way just 15% of the time, we're doing really good! Ha!) Of course, in the mind of the one rebelling, they are justified because of their familiarity with the leader's personal flaws and weaknesses. Everything in the mind of the rebellious one is colored by this "familiarity-factor", so much so, that the person now feels completely justified in stirring up controversy against the leader and/or that church. Also over time a person who has been generous and hard-working in a local church can begin to feel that the church owes them something. And that something would be to "get my own way!" I remember I had a man in the last church I pastored that was like this. This man had a heart full of love for the church and His Lord. No doubt about it. He would volunteer and work, and work, and work in the church. If something practical, electrical, or mechanical needed to be done, I could always count on him. But

his service was a bitter-sweet experience. Without fail, every three to six months, if he didn't get his way on some issue with either me or someone else in the church, there would be a big fallout!

You hear people talk of high impact-low maintenance people and low impact-high maintenance people. But I've learned there also exists low impact-low maintenance people and high impact-high maintenance people. This man was a high impact church member, but he was also high maintenance! This man who was a champion in one part of his service to the Master eventually abandoned me and the church, because of his strong opinionated spirit... to his and his own family's loss. O how we all need to be broken of our opinionation! Ouch!

The spirit of rebellion is so insidious, so subtle, and is so smooth that each of us must guard our hearts diligently. We must realize that it is our responsibility to flow with God's chain of command.

I think it is very encouraging that God hides nothing in the scriptures. I am encouraged by Acts 15:36-41 where Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. The Kingdom of God kept marching-on, however, despite the controversy. God still used Paul. And God still used Barnabas, but elsewhere. A parting of ways is the inevitable eventuality in some of our relationships. Again this is because people change, goals change, and sometimes this makes us no longer compatible with someone. (And the changes are not always bad either... often it is just our own management of the change that creates the controversy.) We should understand that, generally speaking, God expects the follower to flow with the leader, not the other way around. In any relationship, someone has to "GIVE IN" at some point or there is no longer a basis for that relationship. Psalm 133 reveals that unity and anointing flow from the top down, not from the bottom up. The flow of oil comes down and the other parts of the body receive it. The sum of scripture clearly reveals that the one with lesser authority is responsible for yielding to the higher authority in most all cases. Whenever there is a conflict in any realm, the next highest authority is pursued to resolve that conflict. That settles the matter. Not that the higher authority is allowed by God to rule with an iron fist or to abuse his power, but simply that the lesser authority must submit to the higher authority out of due order. The problem comes when we do not correctly discern our place in the local body or when, deep in our hearts, we think we really have co-equal authority with someone else, or that we are wiser than someone else on some issue(s).

But there is no such thing as co-equal authority anywhere in the universe. There exists co-equal value, co-equal love, and co-equal importance, but in no sphere or setting does there exist co-equal authority. Such a misconception is utopia-thinking, unrealistic and naïve. If we don't personally discern when and to whom we should yield in any given relationship or in any given scenario, it will create GREAT LOSS in our lives. We can certainly appeal to and reason with a higher authority, but ultimately we should submit and yield to the one in charge out of respect for God's order of things. We can do so, even with the realization that all human authority has flaws, because we understand that God delegates his authority to men, nevertheless. Otherwise we will constantly be trying to find fault with God's delegated authorities because that would give us an excuse in our own minds, to justify ourselves, cast off restraint and rebel. We realize that God delegates and institutes authority

despite human flaws and imperfections. (What parent is not flawed to some degree or another? But chaos would ensue if parents were not in charge of their children!)

Watchman Nee says, "The controversy of the universe is this: Who is to be in charge? Who is in authority?" He says that "Satan is always trying to challenge the authority of God, not only God's direct authority of the scriptures, but also delegated human authorities as well... those in whom God has invested authority on the earth." I don't know many leaders that are not broken and humble about authority being invested in them. The majority of leaders I know are so broken about this, that they are AFRAID to overstep their boundaries of authority. Most good leaders I have met have made so many mistakes in their own ministries and in their own lives, that they FEAR abusing their own God-vested authority. They'd rather not bruise a broken reed or quench a smoking flax! But on occasion they MUST lean into their leadership and do what is necessary on the behalf of the greater good of the flock. The apostle Paul said that his authority was not intended for the believers' destruction but for their edification. But then he turned right around and reminded them that he would indeed use his God-vested authority if necessary to protect the flock.

Think about it a minute. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, are all co-equally God. They have co-equal value, co-equal importance, and love one another co-equally. However, there does NOT exist co-equal authority between them. The Bible is copiously replete with verse after verse that Jesus the Son is totally submitted to God the Father. The Bible also states that the Spirit will not speak of his own accord, but only what the Father and the Son speak first. Now that is unity! But NOT utopia!

Also realize that all forward or upward movement involves opposition, conflict, and controversy. Gravity is against flying. It has to be overcome. Friction has to be overcome for a car to move forward, inevitably causing the tires to wear out in exchange for the forward motion. If a church chooses to be stagnant and impotent, maybe, just maybe, they can avoid most conflict and controversy. However, if a church decides to be a church on the move, a church in upward motion, a church advancing and taking new territory, CONFLICT, CONTROVERSY, and OPPOSITION to that movement is INEVITABLE and should not shock anyone! Hallelujah! Sometimes that opposition comes from WITHOUT the local church, but sometimes it comes from WITHIN. It happened in the first church of Jerusalem in Acts 6:1. Mike Murdock says, "Satan's favorite entry point into your life is someone close to you." He also says, "Every garden has a snake!" We have to believe that as conflict and controversy comes and goes (an ebb and flow over periods of time), that God is working all things for good to everyone who is called according to His purpose, and that each and every party in the conflict will be blessed after the dust has settled and that God's Kingdom marches on! This is about Him, not about any one of us! To God be the glory! Yes, we should pray towards UNITY, expect UNITY, and work towards UNITY, but we should not naively expect UTOPIA! Christians aren't perfect yet, just forgiven!

Yes, the local church should be a safe-haven, a refuge from the ways of the world. Yes, believers SHOULD act accordingly. But sometimes they don't. It is the personal responsibility of each of us to learn how to behave ourselves in the house of God so as to create a safe atmosphere for all to grow!