

Conflict Resolution

by Ken Newberger

Church Conflict: Often More Than Meets The Eye

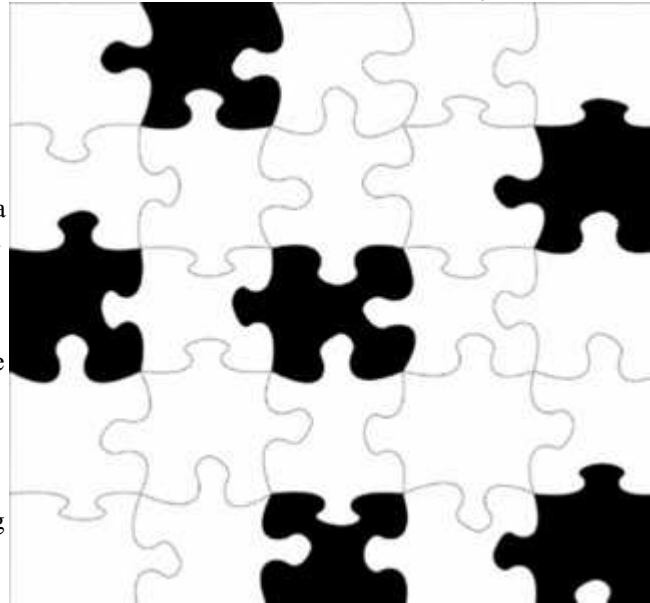
One of the earliest lessons I learned as a church conflict resolution specialist is not to readily accept the diagnosis of another no matter how neutral that person may be. Is this because I am a born skeptic, or simply untrusting of others? If I were to ask you, “what was at the root of Paul and Barnabas’ conflict recorded in Acts 15,” what would you say?

Early in their friendship whenever Paul and Barnabas are mentioned together in the book of Acts, Barnabas’ name is listed first (Acts 11:30, 12:25, 13:2, 13:7), indicating that Barnabas took the leadership role between the two. However, beginning in 13:13, we see a shift. Paul’s name becomes the more prominent one and then becomes listed first (13:43, 13:46, 13:50, 15:2, 15:22, 15:35). Commentators are prone to point out that with the listing of Paul’s name first, a “change of leadership” has now taken place with Paul becoming the more dominant of the two. But this does not hold true 100 percent of the time.

Subsequent to Acts 13:7, there are two settings where Barnabas is mentioned ahead of Paul. The first is among pagans (14:14, cp. 14:12) where Barnabas is called “Zeus” (the chief god) and Paul is called “Hermes” (Zeus’ spokesman). Clearly, Barnabas is seen by the pagans of Lystra as the leader of the group. Then, as far as the leaders in Jerusalem were concerned, if the order of the name is determinative, Paul’s leadership role doesn’t seem totally clear there either. In Acts 15:12 and 25 the leaders of Jerusalem mention Barnabas first.

The even larger point is that as far as Paul and Barnabas’ relationship was concerned, the underlying issue of leadership between the two was never resolved. Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had an acrimonious difference of opinion over the issue of Mark’s continued participation in their missionary work (15:36-41), there was no resolution. Instead, with the real issue unaddressed, the two men split.

In conflict, there are what is known as the “presenting issues” and the “real, underlying issues.” The reason why this distinction is important to understand is because attempting to resolve presenting issues without addressing the real, underlying issues will fail to resolve the true conflict that exists. I have found this to be common in churches. What people publicly complain about may have nothing to do with their real issues.



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Edwin Friedman relates the following true, illustrative story. After 10 years of fruitful ministry, Pastor Smith’s oldest daughter went into a full-blown adolescent rebellion. Pastor Smith was now drawn more deeply into his home life than ever required before. Church members who were most connected to and emotionally dependent upon the pastor sensed the change and reacted negatively. Yet instead of

addressing their own emotional issues, they began to publicly criticize Pastor Smith's ministry. Pastor Smith responded by trying harder to please his critics at each point of their complaint. But, this proved to be totally ineffective. Eight months after the celebration of his ministry, Pastor Smith resigned exhausted, confused and hurt.

When I enter into a new case, I make it my business to cut through the noise and get to the real issues. It is the only way to truly resolve the underlying problems. Should conflict emerge in your life or in church, you should do the same lest matters become more convoluted and the break in the relationship becomes less likely to be repaired.

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