
Pastoral Theology

Pastoral Care for Disagreeing Members Pt. 1

"I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life."

(Philippians 4:2-3 ESV).

As a pastor or elder in a local church, disagreements between members will no doubt arise; marital struggles will come to your attention, or differences between two leaders, or personal matters between two members will come to your attention.

The most important question is, "How should you respond as a shepherd?"

Be Involved.

As a pastor of a local church, be involved in the dispute among your flock in at least two ways.

First, be involved personally. In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul addresses a personal conflict between two sisters, Euodia and Syntyche. We do not know the nature of this conflict and we do not need to speculate. We must remember, however, that such personal conflicts, when not handled properly, have the potential of causing discouragement and/or division in the church. When such matters come to your attention as a pastor of a local church, imitate Paul by intervening (see vs. 9). Do not turn a blind eye to it.

Pastoral work includes, among other duties, conflict resolution. A pastor always seeks for unity and harmony among his flock. He desires to see the sheep coexist peacefully. He is concerned about both corporate and personal disagreements.

Paul directly addresses the disagreeing parties—Euodia and Syntyche. He singles them out in the letter and mentions them by name. His intention is not to embarrass them, but he is holding the

church in Philippi accountable for the dispute between the two ladies in their midst. He is, and we must also, involve other spiritually sound and mature brethren in the congregation including our elders. We must tap on the wealth of their experience and wisdom in handling these matters.

Be involved pastorally.

Disputes are generally judicial in nature. That is, as a mediator, you are to act as a 'judge' in some way. However, where believers are involved, be more pastoral than judicial. Do not be too interested in establishing who is right and who is wrong. Be more interested in their spiritual growth. In this Epistle, such spiritual growth is achieved by having the mind of Christ Jesus—the mind of humility (Philippians 2:1-8).

Humility as demonstrated by Christ Jesus, does not insist on its own rights. Rather, it counts others more significant than yourself and, therefore, being ready and willing to become their "servant" (vs. 3).

How does Paul approach the apparent disagreement?

First, he pleads with Euodia and Syntyche. Elsewhere he invokes his apostolic authority when

addressing church matters (see 1 Corinthians 16:1). But in this case, he “entreats” the two ladies. This is the language of “begging,” out of much humility, pleading with them. This is a pastoral tone. His concern is to see them “agree.”

Paul understands that disagreements, especially when prolonged, usually leave the believers wounded. The members of the congregation may be aware of the personal disputes between any two members, but some may gossip, others may be indifferent, but Paul is concerned for the unity of the congregation.

Second, he assures Euodia and Syntyche of the security of their salvation. He affirms that the names of Euodia and Syntyche are “written in the book of life” (vs. 4). This is a pastoral approach especially when dealing with believers who are likely to be discouraged by disagreements.

Third, he points the disagreeing believers to the Lord. The language “agree in the Lord” (vs. 2) means that the Lord Jesus Christ should be the highest motivation for their pursuit of reconciliation. The fact that they are united in him and are both submitted to his Lordship should incentivise their reconciliation. This is a pastoral approach to conflict resolution. The chief end of

whatever we do, including conflict resolution is the glory of God.

Be Impartial

It is possible as a pastor to throw your weight behind either of the disagreeing parties for various reasons at the expense of the other member. For instance, one of them could be more committed to the church or is a better giver than the other. Such varying levels of service in a local church may result in favouritism and bias when handling disagreements. Paul teaches us at least two lessons when in the matter of impartiality.

a) Encourage both individuals to take initiative.

Paul directs the exhortation to both the parties when he says, "I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord." (vs. 2). He is pleading with each of them to take the initiative in resolving the conflict between them regardless of who is right or wrong, or regardless of who is more offended. In conflict resolution, it does not matter which lady sparked the conflict. Now that they are both embroiled in the dispute, both must take initiative and seek reconciliation.

Evidently, Paul knows the struggle that this church is facing—pride (Philippians 2:1–4). Partiality in

resolving this dispute would have, therefore, been a recipe for disaster. As a pastor, be wary of favouritism when helping your members to resolve their conflicts. Partiality can easily fuel pride.

b) Encourage both individuals in an equal

manner. Paul does not elevate one woman's service to the Lord at the expense of another. He commends their service in an equal manner when he says that they "have laboured side by side with me in the gospel" (vs. 3).

Our service to the Lord is not the same since the measure of grace given to each varies (cf. Romans 12:6). But this does not give an occasion to elevate one servant above another. Paul's intention in this letter is to cultivate humility in this church.

Therefore, as a pastor of a local church, being involved in conflict resolution between your members affords you an opportunity for their sanctification. That is, the aim is to have two parties conformed to the image of Christ—growth in humility (Philippians 2:5). This is the reason you must grab such an opportunity as the Apostle Paul did.

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