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# Growing Pains: Managing Conflict in Church Planting

TOM JONES AND MIKE DECKER

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**W**e're having a baby!" As any parent can attest, that statement is one of the most exciting and reality-changing exclamations that can be uttered. I know because I just lived through the arrival of my second child—a girl. When my wife informed me that we were pregnant again, I was ecstatic. As the news spread through our families and friends, everyone seemed to catch "baby fever." Suddenly everyone was interested in children, and as a result, baby names, possible gender, and whether this one would get lucky and look like my wife seemed to be all anyone wanted to talk about. We were excited too. We put the nursery back together, we started re-collecting all of the gear necessary to care for an infant, and we began the process of selecting names. My wife went to baby showers and celebrated the joy of the impending arrival. We waited anxiously and excitedly for the arrival of our little girl. When the day finally arrived, we were on top of the world. Things went great at the hospital, and by the time we made it home, we were convinced that my wife had given birth to the perfect baby. That theory lasted about three hours. Our daughter wasn't sure that she really liked to eat, and it was obvious she had serious disdain for extended periods of sleep. In order to get her to sleep we had to hold her in exactly the right position and if we changed that position, even to breathe, she let us know behavior of that nature was not acceptable. Having been parents once before, we weren't exactly shocked, but we were quickly reminded that having an infant around the house wasn't perfect. It wasn't easy, and it wasn't without some measure of conflict.

The same is true in the establishment of new churches. In fact, the phrase "we're planting a new church" produces some of the same responses as "we're having a baby." In the days leading up to the start of the church everyone is excited and filled with dreams of what the new church will be like. As the vision is fleshed out, the name is selected, and the pieces start coming together, people are thrilled as they anxiously

await the birth of the church. When the day finally arrives and the church is born, everyone is on top of the world, they find themselves secretly thinking they may have done it—they may have planted the perfect church. Unfortunately, the church won't be perfect. At some point in the life of the church someone won't like something, or there will be a problem that leads to a disagreement and suddenly it's there: conflict.

Conflict is a normal part of the human equation. It should be no surprise that the history of God's people in scripture reflects experiences where there is conflict.

In fact, the Bible reveals much about conflict. In the New Testament book of Acts, we learn a great deal about how the early church managed conflict. This is of particular interest and value to present-day church planters and church planting organizations. Like the early church and having babies, new baby churches experience a number of growing pains. No matter how hard one may try to keep it from occurring, conflict



in new churches is unavoidable; it's a part of life. It's not a matter of "if," but rather "when." As Jim Van Yperen puts it, "If death and taxes are the first two certainties, then conflict is the third. Life requires conflict. It is an essential part of God's redeeming plan."<sup>1</sup> Haugk echoes that opinion: "Conflict is a fact of life throughout society, including the church. Conflict that hones the edge of an organization and keeps it mindful of and true to its purposes is healthy. An organization with no conflict at all (and we don't know of one) must have either no purpose at all, or at best a very frivolous one."<sup>2</sup> As new church planters, or as members of existing congregations, we must understand and accept the inevitability of conflict.

In the book of Acts we have a record of the establishment of many new churches and as one would expect, there is considerable conflict. From the very beginning of the church there has been conflict. As a result, Acts has become a textbook on how to handle conflict in the church. For our purposes we will look at two incidents, the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15 and the more serious conflict regarding Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Both are extremely instructive and helpful when it comes to learning how to handle conflict in a new church setting.

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conflict.**

#### **PAUL AND BARNABAS: ACTS 15:36–41**

Acts 15 is seen by some to be the conflict chapter of the early church. Early in the chapter we see that a controversy arose when a group of men from Judea traveled to the church in Antioch and taught that salvation could not be secured by Gentiles without circumcision. Church planters Paul and Barnabas expressed significant disagreement and were sent by their commissioning church in Antioch to discuss the issue with the mother church in Jerusalem. After considerable debate, the Jerusalem Council resolved the question by relaxing the requirements for Gentiles and sent both a written response and messengers to confirm the Council's findings. The decision that came from this meeting was perhaps the most important one made by early church leaders. It came out of conflict.

The second conflict in Acts 15 is the disagreement between church planting team members, Paul and Barnabas. Verse 39 says, "There arose such sharp disagreement that they separated." The key word in this sentence is *paroxysmos*, meaning "sharp disagreement, irritation."<sup>3</sup> There is a sense that the conflict carried a strong emotional quality to it.<sup>4</sup>

What was going on between Barnabas and Paul? During the debate at the Jerusalem Council, they were united. Not much later, they were in such difference of opinion that they disbanded their successful church planting team. What happened? Were they not spiritual enough? Were they no longer a part of God's will? Let's take a closer look.

The conflict centered on John Mark. Paul suggested that the church planting team "visit the believers" (verse 36) where they had previously preached and established churches. The language in this verse suggests a sense of oversight and inspection of the young churches. Barnabas desired to have John Mark, his cousin (Col 4:10), join the team but Paul strongly disagreed.<sup>5</sup> Family ties are strong, but Barnabas was also a people person. He was an encourager and mentor (Acts 4:36). He saw value in investing time in the young John Mark regardless of past failures.

In contrast to Barnabas, Paul was a task-driven person and was adamant that John Mark not be allowed to become a part of their church planting team. He had deserted Barnabas and Paul on an earlier trip (Acts 13:13), and their mission was too important "to enlist someone who might prove unreliable."<sup>6</sup> The writer, Luke, seems to agree with Paul. His description of John Mark's departure from the church planting team

communicates a sort of apostasy or abandonment of ministerial work.<sup>7</sup> The mission to which the church planting team had been called was not a matter of human strategy or motivation but of divine commission. “Commitment to it was therefore not a matter of personal taste (see 1 Cor 9:16–18).”<sup>8</sup>

From our church planting experience, there is another issue that plagues church planting teams that also may have also been an underlying problem in the conflict between Paul and Barnabas. All church planters experience a great deal of physical, emotional, and spiritual stress as they go through the process of starting churches. Many church planting teams underestimate how these pressures impact the relationships represented on the team. Likewise, Paul and Barnabas definitely would have experienced the same kinds of stress,

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and in addition to the normal pressures of church planting, they also had just participated in the heated debate that took place at the Jerusalem Council. Does it not make sense that the constant stress eventually took its toll on the relationship of Barnabas and Paul? We believe so. And we also believe that this stress is an issue that present-day church planters should take into consideration.

So who was right, Paul or Barnabas? Perhaps both were right and wrong, and God used this conflict to further his kingdom. Barnabas was right to champion John Mark and give him a second chance. We know he must have succeeded in his mentoring of John Mark, because later even Paul comes to appreciate

and love John Mark. Certainly every church planter should have a John Mark or Timothy to mentor in church planting. However, Paul’s commitment to the task of fulfilling his church-planting mission to reach the Gentiles is also commendable. He saw the assignment as too important to risk failure because of the lack of commitment on the part of a team member. Without Paul’s singleness of mind, how successful would the expansion of the church have been?

There are a number of observations that can be made about the Barnabas and Paul conflict. First, conflict occurs amidst even the best of church planting teams. Here we have two giants of the faith, yet they had a difference of opinion that was so serious that they dismantled their team. Second, this kind of conflict can be handled in a way that glorifies God and is not destructive to the church. Paul and Barnabas agreed to disagree and parted amicably. There was no backbiting nor slander, but rather mutual respect that resulted in the commission of two teams instead of one. Two teams allowed for both John Mark and Silas to be added to the ministry of church planting, which enabled more work to be accomplished. Third, both men kept the mission of the church in focus, found a way to fulfill it, and at the same time remained true to their own personal convictions.

### **ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA: ACTS 5:1–11**

One of the first serious conflicts in Acts is found in the fifth chapter. This is the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). As you will remember, the members of the early church shared all of their resources and from time to time sold property to help other members of the community. In Acts 5 we have the record of a married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who had sold land and brought the money from the sale to Peter. They did not, however, surrender all of the proceeds, but tried to give the impression that they had. Ananias came before Peter and laid the money at his feet in an act of submission and dedication, but Peter saw into Ananias’ heart and knew that he was lying. Peter reminded Ananias that he didn’t have to sell the land or give all of the money, but because he lied, there was trouble. Peter explained that in their selfish attempt at

self-promotion Ananias and Sapphira hadn't just lied to the church, they had lied to the Holy Spirit. When Ananias heard those words, he fell down dead and was carried off and buried. A few hours later Sapphira came to Peter, not knowing what had happened, and instead of being greeted with thanks, she was grilled by Peter as to the amount of money they had received for the land. When she substantiated her husband's story, Peter announced to her that she had attempted to deceive the Holy Spirit, and as a result she too fell down dead. Luke goes on to explain that as a result of this, a great fear came upon the whole church as well as everyone who heard the story.

This is obviously a serious conflict. This isn't a difference of opinion as we saw with Paul and Barnabas. It isn't a conflict over strategy, methodology, or style; this is a matter of sin. Ananias and Sapphira aren't having a misunderstanding with the "faith promise" committee concerning a pledge; they are guilty of secrecy, collusion, and attempting to deceive the Holy Spirit. Ananias and Sapphira have lied to God, and what is at stake here isn't simply their integrity—it's the integrity of the entire body. Luke uses language here to describe Ananias that had previously been reserved for Judas Iscariot (Luke 22:3). Satan has filled Ananias' heart, and Ananias has violated the integrity and the character of the entire community. Witherington writes, "Luke sees this story not just as being about human greed and duplicitous actions but about an invasion of the community of the Spirit by the powers of darkness by means of Ananias."<sup>9</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson adds, "The community was constituted as 'one mind and heart' by the Spirit of God. It was the Spirit that led them to call nothing their own and share all their possessions. But this couple 'falsified the Spirit' in the first place by their breaking the unanimity of intention; they 'colluded' in their action. They were hoping that by counterfeiting the gesture, they could both partake of the community life and 'hold back something of their own.'"<sup>10</sup> The *koinōnia* of the early church was being threatened.<sup>11</sup> It was serious business.

This was a terrible conflict for the early church to face and, though it's sad to admit, it is the type of conflict we often face in the new church setting. Churches are filled with imperfect, sinful people and as a result there are going to be serious conflicts. The type of conflict that threatens the *koinōnia* of the church has to be handled quickly and handled well.

Unfortunately, this is the type of conflict that we desire to deal with the least. When conflict of this nature occurs, we are tempted to overlook it or rationalize it for fear that confronting it might derail a young church. To allow conflict born of sin to run its course in a church, especially in a new church, is to allow sin the opportunity to infect so much of the church that it becomes wholly ineffective at fulfilling its purpose. Its health and very life are threatened. To allow conflict of this nature is to allow the church to be stripped of its *koinōnia* identity, and power, and therefore to allow the body of Christ to become a warped caricature of God's intended design. To allow conflict born of sin to go unchecked for the sake of comfort or convenience is a victory for Satan and a death-blow to the very foundation of a community that had initially held so much promise. Just like a serious disease can easily bring death to a newborn baby, so can this kind of unchecked conflict bring death to a new church. Serious conflict like that of Ananias and Sapphira has to be confronted. We suspect there are times when we all wish we had Peter's incredible prophetic insight. There are probably even times we secretly

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wish that God would handle the sources of conflict in our churches as swiftly and as definitively as he handled Ananias and Sapphira so that great fear would grip everyone else in our flock who might be prone to causing problems. Fortunately for all of us, judgment doesn't always come as quickly as it did in this case.

What then is the best way to handle this type of conflict in a new church setting? Despite all of the books and articles that exist on handling conflict in the church, the best advice is still found in Matt 18:15–17. As Jesus instructs us, when conflict arises, we should do our best to handle the matter privately and confront the individual one on one. If that doesn't work, Jesus commands that we confront the individual

again, this time in the presence of witnesses. If the matter still is unresolved, we are to go before the leaders of the church, who will have the task of trying to lead that person to repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation between the one offended and the greater body of Christ. The goal is always reconciliation.

We all understand this process, its potential and its benefits, but what if the person will not repent? What if the person refuses to acknowledge the sin? In those cases the apostle Paul instructs, "After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions, since you know that such a person is perverted and sinful, being self-condemned" (Titus 3:10–11). A "factious" person is one who sets up warring parties. The person is threatening the

*koinōnia* of the church. While this might seem a bit extreme, that's exactly what a person who refuses to repent is doing—drawing a line and pitting a battle between the community of light and the influence of darkness. As we have explained, that simply cannot be tolerated in the church. However, when exercising the option of exclusion from the community, we must be extremely careful and always seek reconciliation and restoration. Sometimes, as in the case when Paul provided direction for the church in Corinth, people do come to repentance. In other instances, people refuse and suffer the consequences. While the latter always hurts, and it is difficult to remove yourself physically and emotionally from someone you love, the integrity and health of the baby church has to be the primary consideration. Conflict born of sin cannot be overlooked or rationalized for the sake of comfort or convenience. Handling serious conflict is difficult but necessary, particularly in new churches where the stakes are so high.

**Like Paul and Barnabas, present-day church planting teams should possess a sense of God's call about their mission. This helps to keep conflicts regarding personality, strategy, and other issues in perspective.**

#### **PREVENTATIVE MEASURES TO REDUCE CONFLICT IN CHURCH PLANTING**

Like Paul and Barnabas, present-day church planting teams should possess a sense of God's call about their mission. This helps to keep conflicts regarding personality, strategy, and other issues in perspective.

It is important for church planting teams and organizations to understand that there will be conflict. When that fact is accepted, there is little surprise when it happens.

All church planters should undergo professional church planting assessment. This exercise usually provides psychological testing, team building exercises, personality profiles, various simulation modules, and projects that allow for valuable input about an individual's or team's potential success. Quality assessment will not and should not eliminate all conflict. However, it will reduce conflict and it will help teams to understand each other so that conflict can be dealt with in healthy ways.

Written mission, vision, and value statements help to reduce conflict. It is important that church planting teams know what is important to the team, how they will accomplish the mission, and how they will relate to one another. This is not to say that there is never healthy discussion about these issues. In fact, healthy

conflict around core beliefs leads to open discussion that leads to sharpened understanding.

Team building is also an important task that must never be left for later. All too often church planters get involved in the urgent activities required to get the church started, but pay little attention to fostering the relationships of the team members.

Finally, new churches should unwaveringly commit to high biblical standards when resolving conflict. As we mentioned earlier, it is hard to improve on the clear teaching found in Matthew 18.

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#### NOTES

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- 3 Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 472.
- 4 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 282.
- 5 Johnson, 282.
- 6 Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), 466.
- 7 Witherington, 472.
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- 9 Witherington, 215.
- 10 Johnson, 287.
- 11 Witherington, 215.