

Reflection #5: Paul and Conflict



Paul's life was filled with conflict - with Jews, with Greek culture, with Roman authorities and with fellow Christians. In some cases, he dealt with conflict by confrontation; in others, by desertion; in still others, with hurt and anger, and ultimately, reconciliation. In all this, Paul came to deep insights into the meaning of the Cross of Christ and of the Christian community as the Body of Christ.

Before going to Ephesus, Paul stopped at Antioch only to learn that members of the Jerusalem church had come to Antioch insisting that Gentile converts be required to observe Jewish laws of circumcision and diet. **PAUL WAS FURIOUS!** Paul and Barnabas immediately set out for Jerusalem. Their meeting with Peter, James and John settled the question: no circumcision of Gentile converts! However, when they returned to Antioch, they were followed by "Judaizers" (Christians) from Jerusalem who tried to reinforce the Jewish identity of Jewish converts and to drive a wedge between Jewish converts and Gentile converts on the matter of sharing meals.

Even Peter "backtracked" on meal-sharing with Gentiles and was confronted by Paul on the issue (Gal.2:11-21). Seeing that the Antioch community had become divided along ethnic lines, Paul felt they could not celebrate Eucharist authentically and decided that he could not represent a divided community! Paul left Antioch in the spring of 52 AD, never to return. However, by cutting his ties with Antioch, Paul lost his apostolic accreditation. He now had no defense against the charge that he was a maverick who represented no one but himself.

If Paul was to have any credibility, it was imperative for him to give the root of his authority. In his letter to the Galatians, (Gal. 1:1) he claimed that he had been sent directly by Jesus Christ, a claim he made in every subsequent letter except the letter to the Philippians. Furthermore, he interpreted the promise made to Abraham's offspring as referring to Jesus; thus those who belong to Jesus are the true descendants of Abraham (Gal. 3:29).

Accordingly, Paul's real credibility lay in the lives of vital communities whose members had been transformed by their fidelity to Christ. The fidelity of Christ's self-sacrificing love is the source of the fidelity of believers. And in this fidelity all his followers are **ONE PERSON** in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:27-28) and Christ is present to the world in a "new creation" (Gal. 6:14-15). **THIS INSIGHT WAS A RADICAL BREAKTHROUGH IN PAUL'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRIST AND HIS FOLLOWERS!**

Read: Gal. 1:1; Gal. 2: 11-14; Gal. 2:19b-21; Gal. 3:27-28.

1. How have I experienced conflict with a person in authority?
2. How have I experienced conflict with someone over whom I had authority?
3. Can I recall an occasion when conflict yielded a deep insight for me?

Hymn: "Now Know We Not the Meaning" #635