

Dealing with the Agitators

Sometimes in life we have to deal with things that are hard, that cost us something. We find that we need to confront someone about their behaviour or something they've said that's not true. I think most of us, when we're facing a situation like that, try to think of the best way we can go about it. What can we say, or how can we say it, that will cause the least offense, or do the least damage to our relationship with the other person?

My approach to these issues, unless I happen to be feeling quite angry about them, is to be as vague as possible. If I'm feeling angry, I'll be pretty direct. Vagueness has the advantage of letting people know that you're not happy with them without giving them an opportunity to protest their innocence or claim to be misunderstood. Vagueness has the disadvantage of not really dealing with the underlying issue and so you're no further ahead, but it might keep someone from being upset with you.

Fortunately for us, Paul was never tempted to come back at the agitators in Galatia with some vague criticism of their influence on the believers there. He was always going to be direct and uncompromising, but, you can clearly see in Galatians 4 that he, like any of us would do, had thought through the process by which he would confront their teachings.

First step: He establishes that he had been well-treated by the Galatians when he first went there, that he had been received well and cared for and he asks them to continue their friendship with him now.

Second step: He tells the Galatian believers that the false teachers, the agitators, are not being their good friends because they aren't showing true caring.

Third step: Paul uses an illustration to make clear the distinction between those agitating for greater respect for the laws of Moses and those who are standing in the freedom of their faith in Jesus.

Fourth step: He quotes Scripture to say, "Get rid of the law and the legalists, for they are no longer heirs of God's promise to Abraham."

That's the hard thing Paul has to say to these dear folks in Galatia. That's the thing he's been building towards for four chapters. He's defended himself against the accusations of the agitators and he's defended his gospel against the encroachments of legalism. Now he has to say the hard thing to those who have been taken in by those who have come to trouble them: get rid of them and get rid of all traces of legalism. The Gospel of grace is about freedom in the Holy Spirit, not about acting in ways that make you look like you fit in to the world of classical Judaism.

Let's follow the argument through now, as we read the text together:

You did not mistreat me when I first preached to you. Surely you remember that I was sick when I first brought you the Good News of Messiah. But even though my sickness was revolting to you, you did not reject me and turn me away. No,

you took me in and cared for me as though I were an angel from God or even Christ Jesus Himself. Where is that joyful spirit we felt together then? In those days, I know you would gladly have taken out your own eyes and given them to me if it had been possible. Have I now become your enemy because I am telling you the truth? (4:12b-16)

What happened to our friendship? You seemed to really appreciate me and took such good care of me, and now it seems like I'm your enemy. What's going on? He mentions being sick - some scholars have argued recently that he is talking about bearing the marks of persecution. He had suffered beatings and stonings, even during the Galatian mission with Barnabas, and he may have made quite a fearful impression. There was a sense in that time that such a person was cursed, and might pose a threat to the local community. But Paul says that they welcomed him and treated him with care, "as though I were an angel from God or even Messiah Jesus Himself."

But something has gone wrong since Paul left the region. "Where is that joyful spirit we felt together then?" "Have I now become your enemy because I am telling you the truth?" Now, they seem to think of Paul as an enemy, as someone who they are suspicious of, as someone who offends them by the things he is now saying. The estrangement was painful for Paul - and more than a little concerning. So, he attempts to stir up some memories of happier days among those he's trying to reach, again, with the Gospel.

Next up, he tells the Galatians that the agitators are not looking out for their best interests. Listen to how Paul describes their motives:

Those false teachers who are so anxious to win your favour are not doing it for your good. They are trying to shut you off from me so that you will pay more attention to them. Now it's wonderful if you are eager to do good, and especially when I am not with you. But oh, my dear children! I feel as if I am going through labour pains for you again and they will continue until Christ is fully developed in your lives. How I wish I were there with you right now, so that I could be more gentle with you. But at this distance, I frankly don't know what else to do. (17-20)

Look, those other guys don't really care about you. They care about wanting you to be their followers, to be able to influence you, to use you in their cause, but they don't care about you. They want to keep me away from you, and keep you shut off from me. But I'm in agony, and I will continue to be in agony for you, because I care so much that you don't lose the promises of God, the blessings of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus. This hurts so much, my dear friends, and I don't even know how to tell you. I'd like to be having a calm conversation, but that's not possible so far away - I don't know how to reach you.

There's desperation in Paul's voice - I think we can hear it, even through all these centuries. You get the emotion - you can hardly miss it - but do you notice that thing that's driving Paul? His passionate concern is that the life of Jesus is developed in the

lives of those he had recently led to faith in Galatia. “I am going through labour pains for you again, and they will continue until Messiah is fully developed in your lives.” The goal is clear - each believer also being a disciple, a mature follower. And the commitment to achieving that goal is also clear - whatever it takes, however long the process needs.

That’s Paul’s ambition in relation to the Galatian believers, but the people there are not responding well to him; they are clearly being persuaded by the legalists, the agitators, whose motivation is to win these new believers into their camp.

And now we come to the climax of Paul’s argument, and his call to action.

Listen to me, you who want to live under the law. Do you know what the law really says? The Scriptures say that Abraham had two sons, one from his slave-wife and one from his freeborn wife. The son of the slave-wife was born in a human attempt to bring about the fulfillment of God’s promise. But the son of the freeborn wife was born as God’s own fulfillment of His promise. (4:21-23)

Let’s break there so that everyone can be caught up with the story of Abraham. God had promised Abram and Sarai a son (this was before He changed their names to Abraham and Sarah), and said that he would be the father of a nation that would live in the land of Canaan. But Abram was getting old - he was now 85 - and his wife, Sarai was 75. Genesis 16 starts with these words, which betray a human anxiety and more than a little doubt about God’s promises:

But Sarai, Abram’s wife, had no children. So Sarai took her servant, an Egyptian woman named Hagar, and gave her to Abram so she could bear his children. “The LORD has kept me from having children,” Sarai said to Abram. “Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her.” (Gen. 16:1,2)

The result was a young man who Abram named Ishmael. This brought great stress to their family, to Abram and Sarai’s marriage and, ultimately, this human intervention into finding the fulfillment to God’s promise, resulted in the breakup of the family. After Sarah gave birth to Isaac, at the age of 90, Hagar and Ishmael were sent away.

So, that’s the story that Paul is telling his Galatian friends about: “The son of the slave-wife was born in a human attempt to bring about the fulfillment of God’s promise. But the son of the freeborn wife was born as God’s own fulfillment of His promise.” One was two human beings’ best solution; the other was God’s solution - and promise!

Now, back to Galatians:

Now these two women serve as an illustration of God’s two covenants. Hagar, the slave-wife, represents Mount Sinai where people first became enslaved to the law. And now Jerusalem is just like Mount Sinai in Arabia, because she and her children live in slavery. But Sarah, the free woman, represents the heavenly Jerusalem. And she is our mother.

At this point Paul interjects a quotation from Isaiah about the woman who couldn’t bear children now having more than all other women. Then ...

And you, dear brothers and sisters, are children of the promise, just like Isaac. And we who are born of the Holy Spirit are persecuted by those who want us to keep the law, just as Isaac, the child of promise, was persecuted by Ishmael, the son of the slave-wife. (4:24-29)

The set-up for Paul's conclusions is now complete. All that's left is the application: what will you do about this situation? And he gets to that next. But first, he draws out this picture of the two covenants as the two wives of Abraham. One is an Egyptian slave, Sarah's servant, and the other is a free woman - Sarah. Paul compares the status of the slave woman to the status of the Israelite people at Mount Sinai, being placed under the yoke of the law. That's who they are now. Paul describes them as the people of Sinai because that's where they first became "enslaved" to the law. Why does he use the word "enslaved"? Because they were bound to obey the law under the covenant God had made with them. They were the people of God, delivered from bondage in Egypt by God and now they were obligated to keep the laws God had given them from Mount Sinai.

One of the most striking statements in this passage, one that probably infuriated the agitators, was Paul's statement about the city of Jerusalem: "Jerusalem is just like Mount Sinai in Arabia, because she and her children live in slavery." This is a key text, and I think it suggests to us that, yes, most likely, the agitators who had made their way to Galatia had come from Jerusalem - just like the ones who came to Antioch and who Paul described in chapter 2. It would be difficult to avoid the conclusion, given this statement, that Paul has concluded that the Jerusalem church is a hotbed of legalism, of Jewishness, that has to be addressed if the church is going to live out the Gospel that Jesus had delivered to him. This can't go on. And so he confronts it as boldly and directly as he can: "And now Jerusalem is just like Mount Sinai in Arabia, because she and her children live in slavery."

So, where is freedom to be found? "But Sarah, the free woman, represents the heavenly Jerusalem and she is our mother." Remember that the children that came through Sarah's line were the children whom God had promised. So, it's safe to conclude that Paul is here referring to those who have believed in Messiah, who have demonstrated faith in God's fulfillment of His promise, the church of Jesus who now constitute the heavenly Jerusalem.

After reaffirming the identity of the believers as the children of promise, "just like Isaac", Paul goes on to say that those who are born of the Holy Spirit are persecuted. And, again, he goes back to the home life of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael and notes that the infant Isaac was "persecuted" by Ishmael, the son of the slave woman. The incident is told in Genesis 21 where a party was thrown to celebrate a milestone in little Isaac's growing up, but where Ishmael made fun of his little half-brother. Whatever he did, it made Sarah furious and she insisted that Ishmael be forced to leave the house with his mother. Abraham was sad about the situation, but he did as his wife wanted and Hagar and Ishmael left.

What's the application for the Galatians? "We who are born of the Spirit are persecuted by those who want us to keep the law." It's the legalists who are manipulating the new believers of Galatia, they who are taking advantage of their lack of knowledge of the Gospel or even of the Hebrew Scriptures. They are treating the Gentile Christians as if they are second class, a lower level of Christians, because they don't observe the certain aspects of the law that these agitators from Jerusalem observe.

And now comes the final judgment from Paul:

But what do the Scriptures say about that? "Get rid of the slave and her son, for the son of the slave woman will not share the family inheritance with the free woman's son." So, dear friends, we are not children of the slave woman, obligated to the law. We are children of the free woman, acceptable to God because of our faith. (4:30,31)

This is as harsh as it gets: "Put them out of the church. These are not Gospel people, not Spirit folk." The church is a place that welcomes people, lots of different people from different backgrounds with different needs and viewpoints about a whole lot of issues. But there is one place it is very vulnerable, and needs protection and that place is the nature of the Gospel message. If people come in to a body of believers preaching a different gospel, as these agitators had done and which Paul confronted in the first chapter, you can't make room for that. And here, now, finally, Paul says you have to show them the door.

The New Testament often refers to the Church as the "Body of Christ". Think about your own body. You can welcome all sorts of things into your body: greasy burgers, spicy Mexican tortillas, a south-east Asian stir-fry or a samosa. You can have an amazing variety of nutrients pouring into your digestive tract, and your body will handle it all really well. But, some things you have to say "No" to ... or the results won't be pretty. One year a significant number of water-melons were sprayed with something too close to their trip to the market and some of us, myself included, ingested the poison. It was a miserable few hours that left me with very bloodshot eyes and feeling weak. It was awhile before I ventured to buy a watermelon again.

In the culture that we live and work in, there are so many views about Jesus and who He was and who He wasn't that someone could probably put together a "Jesus Catalogue" to help people sort out what they wanted to believe. So many of the cults say that they believe in Jesus, but their Jesus is not the Jesus of the New Testament. He didn't die on a cross, He didn't rise from the dead, He didn't claim to be God, He didn't do miracles, He just taught.

The Gospel people, the people of the Spirit, know that Jesus is more than a teacher and that the Gospel is more than good advice or an emotional lift. It's the life-changing news that we can be in a right relationship with our Creator, that He forgives those who put their trust in Jesus, who treasure His death and resurrection on our behalf and who welcome His Spirit to live within us. It's not up to us to alter the gospel, to adapt it to

modern times, to amend it to our changing circumstances or to the needs of others. It's our job to receive it, to treasure it, and to pass this good news on to others. Part of treasuring God's good news is to make sure that we don't mess with it, that we don't add a bunch of qualifiers, that we don't make it a mishmash of good news mixed with some not-so-good news that makes us a bit more comfortable, but which doesn't reflect the nature of God or the promises that He made 4000 years ago and fulfilled in Jesus Messiah.

Here's Paul's conclusion: If these agitators can't receive the fact that God has extended His grace to Gentiles who have none of the external marks of the Jewish faith, then they can't be allowed to continue to have a place of influence in the church. They have to be put out. They are too dangerous to the integrity of the Gospel to be allowed to continue to lead people into the slavery of legalism. Even near the beginning of the Christian church there was the need for protection - false doctrines would spring up several times in the decades that followed - and Paul felt he had to draw a line in the sand. We will receive people from anywhere and everywhere - but we will not compromise what Jesus has done for us on the cross of Calvary. That is essential truth, for now and forever, and we will hold on to that truth.