

Having Difficult Conversations

Read Galatians 2:11-21

There are lots of difficult conversations in the pages of the Bible; conversations between God and Israel through the prophets in the Old Testament and many between Jesus and the leaders of Israel in the New Testament times but we're going to look at the difficult conversation that happened between Paul and Peter in Antioch in Galatians 2:11-21.

Reconstructed Background: There was a rising tide of Jewish nationalism (an anti-Gentile movement) in Israel at the time of the difficult conversation in Antioch. News that Peter is eating with non-Jews in Antioch is creating trouble for the Jewish church in Jerusalem. James has written a letter asking Peter to stop the practice of eating with non-Jews. In our culture eating a meal with someone is still significant, but in the culture of the first century, especially in Jewish culture eating a meal symbolised acceptance and identity – Jews did not even enter Gentile houses, let alone eat with Gentile. But Peter had learned (Acts 10) when the Lord used him to convert Cornelius, the Roman centurion, that God no longer made that distinction, trust in Jesus was the true mark of being one of God's people, not the outward mark of circumcision.

When Peter was in Antioch with Paul and Barnabas and got the letter from James he stopped sharing his meals with non-Jews. There is no doubt that Peter acted from good motives, wanting to stop the persecutions in Jerusalem of Jewish Christians, but he failed to see that his actions implied that Gentile Christians, those who trusted only in Jesus, weren't good enough. His actions even influenced a staunch missionary to the Gentiles like Barnabas, who stopped eating with Gentiles as well. Peter didn't see the implication, but Paul did and he saw that it was a salvation issue and that led him to have one of the most difficult conversations in the Bible.

We should probably expect that Paul and Peter had a private difficult conversation before they had the public difficult conversation. Paul would have wanted Peter to have understood why he needed to be rebuked publicly.

We're not told how it all ended up in Paul's letter to the Galatians but when the issue of whether Gentiles who trusted in Jesus should be accepted as full members of the church or whether they should be circumcised (Acts 15), Peter made this speech: 'Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles should hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.'

Paul's difficult conversation with Peter not only contributed to the health of the church at Antioch, it also contributed to all the churches!

Our difficult conversations probably won't be as earth-shattering as that, it may contribute to the health of someone else but if we do it right no matter what the outcome it will contribute to our own spiritual and emotional health.

Mary loves her Growth Group and she loves being the Growth Group Leader. She loves that the people in it share their lives with each other. She loves that week by week, as they dig into the Bible, they are able to see God's great love and how that changes us from the inside out. Each person in the Group is different, lovely and different. They each bring something to the Group. One girl brings more than the others. Her life is extremely rough. She deals with a tough marriage and kids that aren't interested in hearing about Jesus or pretty much anything. She talks and talks and talks every week about the various situations that she is facing and they are all uncompromisingly difficult. The thing that is tough is that she finds it difficult to see that a professional counsellor would help her. She thinks that Jesus is all she needs. Members of the Growth Group have hinted, shared and flat out talked about the value of seeing someone with professional training when the tough times come – all suggestions are rebuffed.

The Group is suffering – prayer time is consumed, the bible is often left untouched and the mid-week cries for help are frequent and urgent. Other members are disengaging when the same topics are discussed again and again. Mary knows that it's her responsibility to talk this through with her group member. Mary has plenty going on in her life, does she really have the time or the energy to go where no-one wants to go?

It would be pretty easy to stay with the status quo – aren't Christians called to be long suffering? Aren't we called to bear one another's burdens?

This is a burden.

Very few people enjoy engaging in difficult conversations. Even fewer relish the being called into one. Our experiences in these situations may have been painful and so many people seek to avoid difficult conversations at all cost. This leads to issues festering because no one is willing to deal with them. There are steps that leaders/concerned friends can take to thinking through, engage in the difficult conversation and get the best possible outcome.

Those steps are:-

1. Always do some self work first
2. Plan the meeting
3. Actively lead the meeting

Self work

Good preparation is an expression of love for the other person.

A good outcome is much more likely if reflection and thought goes into what to say and how to say it.

Be aware of and manage your own emotions, examine your motives for the conversation and be aware of actions or words that might make you react.

Avoid simplifying and personalising – in fact the opposite is necessary – objectifying and complexifying.

Objectifying – step back and get a clear handle on the situation. A good way to do this is to clearly and concisely describe the behaviour that is generating the difficulty for you, the group. Have accurate and complete information.

Complexifying – The simple answer is pretty much always incorrect. Look at the situation from both your perspective and that of the other person. Take into account needs, interests and values of all parties and consider options available to you.

Power and perceived power is very important. Think through your role as a Growth Group Leader and take into account your leadership style and how the member works with your style.

Clarify the objective for your conversation. What is your desired outcome? What would you like the person to agree to do? Other factors include support, obstacles, time-frames and what will success look like.

Planning is key.

Know your conflict style. Don't avoid or delay a needed meeting, don't engage in an unnecessary meeting.

Outline the meeting before hand – don't drop it on someone without warning.

Connect with the person on the morning of the meeting in a warm and genuine way. Then after the meeting, connect again to normalize the relationship.

Location and body language are important-they need to communicate positive intentions and neutrality. Being away from your space and sitting adjacent to each other are helpful.

One to one conversations are best, unless the person needs a support person. Never have a difficult conversation in front of others – if one starts, close it down and move to a private space.

Have water and a tissue box handy.

Actively Lead.

Know how you will begin, run what you will say through your mind a couple of times.

Don't engage in small talk. Get straight to the point.

Be clear and considerate, thereby avoiding being harsh, destructive or confusing communication.

Think "I" language not "You" language

Be aware of your role and relational base as you have the conversation.

Manage your anxiety and emotions well and facilitate the other person's emotions

- Acknowledge emotions, don't ignore
- Offer a moment to collect themselves
- Stay on task – the emotion is not the problem
- Close and reconvene if emotions get out of hand
- Be comfortable with silence
- Listen – you may learn something
- Facilitate an agreed outcome