

Inter-Missionary Conflict

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History

While it is true that history is a story of redemption, it is also true that history is a story of betrayal. God created a powerful army to serve him but one of his highest ranks attempted to overthrow Him. God created man and soon found him in direct disobedience. God came to earth as a man and opposed by His own people, betrayed by one of his followers and then denied by another. The people who had honored him just days before, turned on him and said, "Crucify him."

It is no mistake that the story of Paul and Barnabas and John Mark is included in the Bible. Two men working side by side end up disagreeing so strongly that they can no longer continue to work together (Acts 15:36-41). This disagreement certainly changed Barnabas' ministry and probably Paul's as well. Thankfully they gave us a good example of how to disagree.

Both my wife and I grew up in ministry families. We both saw our parents ridiculed and criticized by the people they were called to serve, but when the people that were working beside them, turned on them, we saw them truly suffer. In the ministry, we expect challenges to come from those people on the outside, even the people you are actively serving, but when the man in the yoke pulling along with you starts attacking you or your family - that's when you want to pack up and go home.

Why are inter-missionary problems the number one reason missionaries leave the field? Why do these problems cut so much deeper than all the others? Is there anything that can be done to prevent these kinds of conflicts? What is the biblical way to handle it? What should be done to recover from such an attack?

Setup

In order to leave your friends and family, swim against the tide of materialism, pack up your wife and kids, and move half way around the world you have to have the type of personality that doesn't give up easily. Typically, a missionary will be self-motivated and an independent thinker. To get to the field you have to have a well thought out plan and a strong commitment to your calling. Churches expect you to give them a clear, confident description of what your goals will be for the next 3-4 years on the field. This is usually based on a 2-4 week survey trip that you took to the country where you plan to serve. You also will have numerous people tell you that they are so proud of you, or they can't imagine doing what you are doing. After a bit of that you will begin to believe your own hype.

Finally, with one last hard push you will leave for the field. Family and friends will see you off and you feel like a mighty warrior going to battle. When you get to the field things may be pretty much as you expected. You will be learning the language, trying to figure out how to make your way around and you will follow the older missionaries' lead. Somewhere between your first and second year the honeymoon ends. You are probably discovering that the people you are working with aren't all you thought they would be, and they are discovering the same about you. You are now part of a group of self-motivated, independent people that have to work together as a team. You will begin to feel like

you are getting a handle on the language and the situation you are in, and you are desperately wanting to do the ministry that you have been telling people about for the last 4 years or so. At the same time, this is when most missionaries go through serious culture shock, becoming suspicious of all the foreign elements around them.

We now have a perfect storm ripe for pride, jealousy, confusion, and division.

Conflict

In every case of inter-missionary problems that I'm aware of, there was always sin, or at least perceived sin, involved, but it doesn't usually start that way. There are so many ways that Satan can attack at this point that it's hard to say what it might be. It may be that your co-workers are too controlling or perhaps the opposite, they aren't strong enough. In the constantly changing, developing world, all those plans that you committed to your supporting churches may be useless by the time you are settled on the field. Your team of co-workers may tell you that you are really needed for something else. You may see this as a lack of integrity of the people on your team. Or you may feel that you simply can't turn your back on the calling that you expressed to your churches. The attack may be a misunderstanding, that then swells into an accusatory slugfest. It could be a health issue that wasn't taken seriously by the other missionaries. Like Paul and Barnabas, it could be sin in a missionaries life and a disagreement on how it should be dealt with. It can be jealousy from members of the team feeling that you are taking over their life's work. It could be an attack on your children; even the kind that we have seen far too much of in our circles this year. Whatever it is Satan tries to make it unexpected and it comes from the very people you are trusting to fight beside you, not against you.

Resolution

There are many ways that these kinds of crises can be handled. Most of them are selfish and sinful. At this point most missionaries will feel they have been broadsided by a Mack truck, and their tendency will be to lash out or quit. Many missionaries leave the field when these things happen, and a good amount of those end up leaving the ministry. They just can't believe that fellow missionaries would do or say those things and they don't want to be part of it anymore. Some will insist on having their way, they will leave the mission team they are with, and do their best to stay in the area and do the ministry that they originally committed to. Some will fight it out publicly, tearing down their testimony in front of the people they are supposed to be winning for Christ.

The best way to resolve a conflict is for both sides forgive each other. The difficulty with forgiveness is that you are in the right and the other party is in the wrong. Why should you forgive them? Because God commands you to (Col 3:13). This will require humility and submission to God. One side will have to be the first side to forgive the other. Even if only one side forgives the other it is better than fighting. Any sin should be confessed and dealt with appropriately.

If the problem does not end, or if there is sin involved, then spiritual authorities on both sides should be included in further discussions. If there was criminal activity, it should be reported to the proper authorities.

Paul and Barnabas found that they could no longer work together after their "sharp contention".

Sometimes after everything has settled the team finds that they can't continue to minister together. What we don't see is Paul tearing down John Mark and Barnabas. It is as if they agreed to disagree, and they were both used of God.

What can be done about this?

Prevention

We can't be blind to this battle. It should not take us by surprise when it happens. We must work to defend against it.

Once a missionary has committed to a field and is raising support for that field, his future co-workers should be in frequent contact with him. He should know about ministry changes and problems just like any member of the team would.

Churches should not require missionaries to be so specific or confident about their plans. Churches need to get out of the habit of evaluating people on the quality of their 5 year goals and search their hearts to know who God would have them support.

Certainly the missionary can't go to the field distrusting the other missionaries, because he expects one of them turn on him at any moment, but there are ways that we can be aware of the danger and build trust within the team. When the missionary arrives on the field the team should get together to openly discuss potential problems and possible conflicts. Everyone should realize that Satan wants nothing more than to cause division within the team. For those that are working closely together there should be a time of prayer each week concerning unity and clear communication. There should be frequent reminders that they are all there for the cause of Christ, not their own agenda.

Intervention

If the team is aware of the danger of conflict they should be sensitive to any misunderstanding or miscommunication and try to rectify it as soon as possible (Rom 12:18; Heb 12:14). The dissension should not be allowed to fester (Eph 4:26). Those involved in the conflict should be brought together to discuss their differences (Prov. 27:5). They must stop assuming the worst about their co-workers. I Cor 13 is very clear that if we love each other we will assume the best about one another. Both sides should strive to love the other as Christ loved us, even when we were His enemies.

Recovery

So much of the recovery of a conflict like this depends on how the situation was resolved, but there are some things that we can say that will apply in nearly all cases.

Do not suffer alone or in silence. Intense situations must be handled with the advice of wise counsel (Prov. 15:22). Contact a trusted pastor or friend. This is not the person that you can just gossip and complain to. It must be someone who will truly guide you toward healing and future decisions.

Remember the three rules for making decisions when discouraged: Don't make decisions when you are discouraged, DON'T make decisions when you are discouraged, DO NOT make decisions when you are discouraged. This is not the time to decide that you are done on that field or that you are finished with

the ministry. Perhaps you will need to take a furlough to recover enough to make a wise decision, but don't just quit right away.

Children should be counseled, at least by their parents. They should be allowed to talk privately about what happened whenever they need to. If the attack was specifically toward the children then a Christian counselor should speak with the children in addition to the parents counsel. If you demonstrate a lack of forgiveness, your family will want to continue the fight for you. Children will follow their parents lead even in ways that the parents don't intend. I have seen this lead to lifelong bitterness in the children of ministers. Some will reject Christianity entirely. Show your children that you have truly forgiven those that were involved.

We see that Paul worked with John Mark later in his ministry (Col. 4:10, 2Ti 4:11). It isn't explicitly stated, but I believe that forgiveness was offered by Paul and maybe even both parties.

Satan loves to get us to fight each other instead of him. Jesus told His disciples that men will know that they are his disciples by the love that they have for each other (John 13:35). As missionaries we must be His true disciples. We must demonstrate Christ-like love even in the heat of battle. We must be aware of Satan's tactics and his desire to destroy God's work and His workers.

Recommended Reading:

Sande, Ken. *The Peacemaker : a biblical guide to resolving personal conflict*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2004.

Lanham, Stephanie. *Recovering from traumatic stress : a guide for missionaries*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2010.

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