



**ANTIOCH**

COMMUNITY CHURCH

*Building, Serving, Sending... for the glory of Christ*

## **Preference or Principle**

written by J. Mark Fox

Yes, it's true. An age-integrated church can have problems. I have figured out a way, though, to eliminate all the problems in the church. All of them. You ready for this? Get rid of all the people. That's right. As long as there is one person in the church, there will be conflict.

You have heard the story of the man, perhaps, who was stranded by himself on a deserted island for seven years. When he was finally found, he showed his rescuers around the island. They noticed he had built three huts for himself, and asked him what they were for. "This one is where I live," he said, pointing to the first hut. "This one is where I go to church," pointing to the third hut. "What's the other hut for?" the rescuers asked. "That's where I used to go to church." That's the sad truth. Even if the church consisted of you all by yourself, there would be conflict. So, how do we deal with it?

There have been books, even series of books, written about dealing with church conflict. I do not presume to know anything that anyone who has written about the subject doesn't know. But I can tell you from my experience, and from the Bible, that conflict in any church is inevitable. The first church was rocking along pretty smoothly until Ananias and Sapphira decided to lie to the apostles about their offering. You can read about it in Acts 5, but the conflict between leadership and members was short, but not sweet. They lied and they died. End of story.

I would like to say that the conflict we have had at Antioch has been dealt with that quickly (if not that dramatically!), but it hasn't. The second time we see conflict in the early church happened right after Ananias and Sapphira caught a red-eye out of there. You can read about it in Chapter 6 of Acts, and the problem occurred because the Grecian widows in the church were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. Was it racially motivated? Maybe so, but nonetheless the apostles dealt with it swiftly and decisively. They asked the church to select seven men who were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. These men were recommended to the elders who then appointed them as the first deacons in the church.

### **Preference or Principle?**

One of the first items on the agenda for a new church plant, after you have gathered some like-minded people and begun to study the Word and pray together, is to see if there are preferences or principles that could become roadblocks to a healthy and vibrant church. For example, here is a partial list of questions that ought to be asked and discussed. That discussion must be completely honest. If someone thinks he cannot share what he really believes about any one of these issues, the church is headed for trouble down the road

when he decides, “OK, NOW I can tell them how I really feel!”

- Will we use choruses or hymns or both? What type of choruses would not be acceptable?
- Will we offer a nursery? If so, for what ages? For how much of the morning service?
- Will we baptize believers or infants?
- Will we have elders? Deacons? A pastor? Will the pastor be an elder? Will we be congregationally-led or elder-led?
- Will women be allowed to speak during the service? If so, in what capacity?
- Will there be any programs at all in the church? If so, what types of programs might we allow and under what circumstances?
- Will we have special “programs” for the youth or any ministry geared to them or for them?
- Will we adopt a particular creed or doctrine that helps to define what we believe? Which one?
- Will we encourage church membership? If so, how will someone become a member?
- Will we seek to grow as large as possible? Or will we adopt a church-planting vision?
- Will we support a mission program? How will we do outreach?
- Will we encourage people to give regularly?
- Will we have any full-time or part-time staff? What will their responsibilities be?
- Will we meet in a home forever, or move to a larger facility as the need arises? Or will we start in a storefront or some other rented space?
- Will we ever borrow money to buy, to build, or to renovate?
- And last not but least...what name will we give this new church?

Now, you may label a few of those questions as “essentials.” Others of you might argue that they are all nonessentials. If the Bible does not clearly speak on them and their use in the church, then it is dangerous to turn it into an essential. And we all would agree that there are good solid churches practicing everything imaginable on the scale of possibilities for each question!

One of the principles we live by at Antioch, or try to, is from the Reformation: “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, love.” The essentials of the faith, such as the sufficiency of Scripture, are not negotiable. These would include things like the deity of Christ, salvation by grace, the three-personed Godhead, the importance of the local church, and more. All of these are clearly supported by Scripture, and it is precisely because we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture that we do not want to turn a nonabsolute into an absolute. We do not want to commit the error of either adding to Scripture or taking away from Scripture. In nonessentials, then, we want to give each other liberty.

One primary text we use to discuss this at Antioch is Romans 14:1, 4-5: “...not to quarrel

over opinions. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to pass judgment in the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. <sup>5</sup>Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”

If in your study of doubtful things you come to a different opinion with the others in the church, what do you do about it? Well, there are three options.

- Leave and take as many people with you as you can persuade. This is the Acts 20:30 method that Paul warned would happen in Ephesus after he left. Some will attempt to “draw away the disciples after them.”
- Second method: you can submit with a whole heart to the leadership of the church (who presumably has a different opinion about this matter).
- Third method: you can stay and grumble and groan and be a pain to the whole church.

Which of those three methods resembles “in all things, love”? Yes, that would be behind door number 2.

When Llewellyn came to our church in 1998, she had not been in a church before where bass and drums were played. She did not really prefer the choruses, and she let me know about it. I would visit her apartment in the retirement village (she lived alone) and we would talk about the Word and about Jesus and about prayer. Every now and then she would look at me, eyes sparkling, and say, “Mark, I thank God for bringing me to Antioch. I don’t much care for the music, but that’s OK. I love the church. I love the people.”

When she turned 80, I started telling Llewellyn that she was my favorite “octogenarian.” Our visits usually included discussions about the church. Many times she could not come on Sundays because of her health, and she wanted to know what was going on and how everyone was doing. Her eyes would sparkle as she told me almost every time I went to visit, “Mark, I am so thankful that God brought me to Antioch.” And more than once she said, “When I first started coming to this church, I loved that the old were together with the young. The children worship the Lord right there with their parents, and the elderly can take part in the service and be loved by the families. But I have to tell you. When I first came to this church, I couldn’t stand the banging of those drums. It would bother me sometimes, and it is still not my favorite instrument (smile). But now I love to be there and to sing praises with my family, and it doesn’t matter what type of song or what kind of music. I am singing to the One who loves me and who saved my soul!”

Llewellyn went home to be with the Lord a few years ago, and oh, how I miss her! She was a shining example of a dear saint who would not allow preferences to be elevated over principles. Llewellyn chose to stay and submit her preferences, and God gave her the grace to begin to love the preferences of those she chose to serve. O God, raise up more like her!

I know some of you are thinking, “there’s a fourth method, if you just cannot submit your preferences in this area, but you don’t want to cause a problem in the church: you can just

leave quietly.” It is true, but I guess I would have to wonder if it was really a preference if you were willing to break fellowship over it. I believe it must have been a principle.

For one brother, whether women can share a testimony in the Sunday morning service would be a deal-breaker. That brother loves the Lord as much as I do, though we disagree on this issue. Another brother would not go to a church where women are not allowed to speak a testimony or give a word of praise. I think we, too, have the Spirit of God, to borrow a phrase from Paul. So, the bottom line is that these questions must be addressed and agreed upon (or laid down as a nonessential about which you can agree to disagree), unless you want big troubles down the road.

I saw a friend of mine at the Y a few years ago, and he told me about the church he was attending. They are moving from a traditional style of music to a blended style and it is causing a division. Many of the older people are putting up a fight or just slipping out the back door. It is not an easy one to solve is it? That is all the MORE reason to settle that issue right at the beginning, before you open your door for the first time as a church. I wish I could say that every time we have had a conflict in the church, the elders have wisely done what the first church leaders did: discern the heart issues, allowed the Holy Spirit to speak and to act, and appointed godly men who could address the problem and solve it. That has not always been the case, but we have learned a few things about dealing with conflict.

First, I believe the Lord has taught us that much conflict comes when people have a different vision or philosophy of ministry. At the core of these conflicts is a difference in principle. We lost a number of families all at once several years ago who left to start a house church. They wanted a worship service on Sunday morning that was unstructured and “free.” They didn’t want anyone among them to be called “pastor,” lest he be elevated above them in his own mind or in theirs. They wanted each of the cell groups to be churches in their own right, and some even suggested that we not meet but once a month or so all together, and meet weekly in small groups. I understand that there is a “cell-based church” model that is being used out there, and that’s fine. But the elders at this local church don’t happen to agree with some of the philosophy of ministry that cell-based churches embrace. We differ in principle.

So, the elders met with the men of these families, and we looked at the issues they were raising. We looked at the Scriptures together. We talked about our differences of opinion, we discussed, and sometimes we debated. In the end, we had to come to them and say, “We do not agree with this vision you are proposing for Antioch. We would like for you to stay with us and be a part of what God is doing here, but if you cannot agree with our direction as a church, it would be better for all concerned if you leave.” Amos 3:3 says, “Can two walk together unless they are agreed?” In the case of the house church brethren, we realized that we had a different vision and could no longer walk together in the same fellowship. We can certainly walk together in the same community and we can share ministry, eat together, enjoy fellowship, and we must do that for the sake of unity in the body of Christ. But we do not have to be in the same local church fellowship, and in fact,

to try and make it work when we are pulling in two different directions would just be misery for all concerned.

We realized that God sometimes multiplies by dividing. We don't need to be afraid of that.