

GROWN-UP RELATIONSHIPS

1 Corinthians 13v11.

This summer you might have seen a documentary film on TV called 'Malcolm and Barbara – Love's Farewell' by Paul Watson. It followed a woman caring for her husband who was suffering from Alzheimer's. In the film Barbara is driven to distraction by Malcolm who is now so different from the man she married. 'The Times' TV reviewer, David Chater, wrote this: *"The film is desperately sad, and yet because it is so filled with love – proper, grown-up, hard earned love forged by experience and stripped of all illusion and sentimentality it is not depressing in the least."* (The Times 8/8/07) I didn't see the film so I cannot comment, but that phrase *"proper grown-up, hard-earned love forged by experience"* caught my eye. So today I want to explore "Grown-Up Relationships", especially in relation to cell group life.

There is plenty in the New Testament about grown-up behaviour. Here are just two examples. In 1 Corinthians 13v11: Paul is writing about selfless love. *"When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me."* Grown up-love is the opposite of throwing your toys out of the pram because you can't have your own way; or refusing to share your toys with others.

In 1 Corinthians 14v20: Paul tells believers in Corinth to be grown-up when they minister spiritual gifts. *"Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults."* God's gifts are not given for individuals to show off but to build up the whole church. Be mindful of others.

There is nothing quite like rubbing up against other people in real relationships to help you to grow up. That is why I am introducing this theme in a series on cell principles. And today I want to narrow the subject down even further to this: we need to be grown-up when handling disagreements.

1. Grown ups know that relationship problems are a fact of life.

Tensions and disagreements arise between the best of people. When we think about church or our small group we can be hindered by an idealized picture. We imagine that somewhere there is the perfect Christian community without any difficult people or disagreements. Well, there is. In heaven!

Conflict happens in the best of groups. It is unavoidable. If you imagine that by joining Jesus cell group you would bye-pass this you are mistaken. Wherever there are real relationships disagreements are inevitable. Sometimes they are catastrophic and result in major splits. Some of you have experienced this. You bear the scars. So this is a serious subject, and one we shouldn't avoid. It is relevant for every group in a church, not just cells, but level x, worship teams, children's teams and elders.

In Matthew 18v15-17 Jesus anticipates difficulties between believers. He gives specific instruction to help us deal with problems between two

individuals. It should be dealt with privately and not widened unless absolutely necessary. *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."*

In Mark 10 v35-45 Jesus' disciples are indignant over James and John getting too big for their boots. Because this problem is already a public one Jesus calls the group together and addresses the root issue. *"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

In Acts 6v1-7 there is tension between two communities in the Jerusalem church. *"In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food."* The apostles have learned from Jesus because they *"gathered all the disciples together"* and faced the problem.

In Acts 15v36-41 we find a disagreement between two members of the same apostolic team. *"Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord."* So, in this case the disagreement resulted in the two men agreeing to form separate teams.

In Galatians 2v11-14 Paul spills the beans on a controversy between himself and another spiritual giant. *"When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray."*

Real life is different from your dreams. Don't idealize the early church or search for a perfection that doesn't exist. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about such dreams: *"God's grace quickly frustrates all such dreams. A great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves, is bound to overwhelm us as surely as God desires to lead us to an understanding of genuine Christian community... The sooner that moment of disillusionment comes over the individual and the community, the better for both Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial."*

2. Grown ups don't run in fear from relationship problems

In real-life-grown-up relationships you handle disagreements. You work through big issues, rather than skirt round them or run away. This makes you more grown up and deepens your relationships.

It might help if I illustrate this from marriage. When we lead Marriage Seminars, Liz and I often look at the following five different styles of marriage. If you are married you may recognize yourself in one or more of them. But whether you are married or not you should recognize the same styles in other relationships – whether it is a church, group of friends, cell group or team.

The Devitalized Relationship is shallow; there is not much conflict, but not much intimacy either. The couple are like two single people and will always be in danger of drifting further apart. Other relationships can be like this too. Absence of conflict is not necessarily a sign of health.

The Passive-Congenial Relationship is a comfortable old-armchair marriage. It has few ups & downs and therefore very little conflict. Predictability is the main feature. Once certain routines are established there is little variation. Again the level of intimacy is small. When a cell group gets like this it will not be mission minded. It will be cozy and resistant to incomers.

The Total Relationship is one in which the couple are like synchronized swimmers. They are inseparable. They share plenty of intimacy and have shared activities and goals. This is Howard and Hilda from *'Ever Decreasing Circles'*. Some would say that this is 'the perfect marriage'. But is it? This kind of relationship can be suffocating, insular and selfish. And there is another danger. Even a minor disagreement can be a huge threat. Any tension or conflict is regarded as an ominous sign and very serious indeed. The relationship is an eggshell one, it is fragile. People like this often bury their strong feelings and carry on a pretending.

The Conflict-Habituated Relationship is volatile and stormy. There is much more intimacy but it is often painful. Feelings are out in the open and there is constant confrontation. There is nothing boring or predictable about this style of relating! It is like a roller coaster ride. But people like this need to learn how to argue constructively, and how to build one another up, and to resolve conflict by attacking the problem together rather than each other.

The Vital Relationship is one in which there is a healthy balance of togetherness and yet room for personal growth, and where feelings are expressed without being destructive. C. S. Lewis describes something like this when he writes of his own brief marriage: *"For those years Joy and I feasted on love, every mode of it - solemn and merry, romantic and realistic, sometimes as dramatic as a thunderstorm, sometimes as comfortable and unemphatic as putting on your soft slippers.."* ('A Grief Observed') Every marriage relationship is different. But the idea that a great marriage is one in which there are no dramatic thunderstorms is absurd.

And it is the same in any relationship or any group of people relating together. Grown-up relationships are the ones where, if disagreements do arise, we work through them rather than run away. Of course, some situations may prove to be impossible and un-resolvable. But our first thought should not be to leave the group or church and join another. We will find relationship issues wherever we go. Why? Because we always take ourselves with us!

3. Relationship problems can be creative when approached in a grown-up way

Conflict can take us forward. Think of the England rugby team during the recent World Cup. Having been beaten 36-0 by South Africa and shaping up to be the worst ever team to defend their World Championship, they had a clear-the-air meeting. By all accounts no punches were pulled. Everyone let rip and all manner of frustrations were aired. But out of it came something constructive. Some root issues were identified. There was a new team spirit, a new determination to pull together. The coaches made some adjustments. Without the stormy meeting they would have almost certainly been defeated in their next game, against Australia. Against all the odds they beat them and then went on to beat the hosts France and end up in the Final. (Let's not mention that result!)

Jean Vanier writes: *"Communities need tensions if they are to grow and deepen. Tensions come from conflicts... A tension or difficulty can signal the approach of a new grace of God."*

In Acts 6v1-7 the Greek speaking believers were at odds with Hebrew speaking over the daily distribution of welfare. *'The Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group.'* The conflict had uncovered the need for delegation. When this took place it led to even more growth. *"So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."*

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Don't misunderstand me; I am not encouraging you to look for problems or disagreements in your cell group or youth group, your team or group of friends. The apostle Paul put an emphasis on the need to work hard to prevent unnecessary relationship problems arising. *"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."* (Ephesians 4v3) But if and when tensions and conflict do arise, don't throw your toys out of the pram. In County Church, let's be characterised by grown-up relationships.

John Wilthew. November 2007.