

WOUNDS FROM A FRIEND

by Steve Zeisler

"The uncovering of what is veiled and the removing of masks is central to vital Christianity. We live in an age that is very aware of the power of hidden things to sway everything else. Modern psychologists tell us that dysfunctional families, in which anger, guilt and lying remain unresolved, are headed for serious trouble down the road. These things remain unresolved because they are covered up-hidden by a veil-and tragedy is compounded because it is not possible to deal with the problem until the veil is taken away and the truth is revealed.

Exposure, however, is always painful. The bandage that covers the wound eventually will have to be removed, otherwise healing will not take place, but in the removal pain is usually felt. The hostages who have been freed in the Middle East recently had been blindfolded and imprisoned in darkened rooms for long periods of time during their captivity. They must have blinked and recoiled with discomfort on first stepping out into the bright light of the sun when they were finally released. With their freedom came the removal of the blindfolds, and the resultant pain.

Wounded for our good

Proverbs 27:6 says, "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." The process of removing our veils, of exposing what is hidden, of bringing to light difficult realities so that healing may take place is initiated at times because a friend is willing to wound us by exposing us to our folly. A friend is the only one qualified and willing to do this. An enemy does not qualify. An enemy will "multiply kisses," and tell you only what you want to hear, or inflict pain that is destructive. But a friend will be faithful to help you by first wounding you.

We will be covering a fairly long passage from 2 Corinthians this morning, which discusses three different wounds which Paul had to inflict on his friends, the Corinthian church. Because he loved them he had to confront them, probe them and restrict them. In this passage he is going to explain this process so that he might help them (and us) understand why he did what he did.

Three confrontations

Let us begin by first identifying the three occasions when Paul confronted his friends in Corinth. The first is mentioned in chapter 2, verse 1. Paul writes,

"So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you."

The ministry of challenge is always undertaken with difficulty

The painful visit to which he is referring is not mentioned in the book of Acts, but we deduce from reading the Corinthian letters that when Paul was ministering in Ephesus, he heard of the deterioration taking place in Corinth and made a quick trip to the city to correct them. Much pain resulted from this visit, from the apostle's personal appeal to the Corinthians to turn away from their competitiveness, arrogance, love of pleasure, and theological errors.

The second wounding which Paul makes reference to is found in 2:4:

"For I wrote to you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to

grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you."

In chapter 7 of this letter he writes, "I know that my letter hurt you." Subsequent to his painful visit, Paul wrote the Corinthians a hard letter in which a formal indictment was lodged against the church. Paul's letters were read aloud in public. His words contained necessary reprimands in a written document that would not change or fade. Thus the second wounding which Paul inflicted upon his beloved Corinthians was contained in the "painful" letter he wrote to them.

The third is mentioned in 2:5-11. This concerns an individual who is unknown to us, and makes reference to circumstances we know little about. We can surmise that this individual led a group of people to revolt against Paul. (Some scholars suggest that the immoral man judged in 1 Cor. 5 is in view here, but I do not think so.) The godly leadership of the church had set this man outside the fellowship of the church for a time, treating him as an outsider. This is what Jesus himself said to do to an individual as a final act of discipline—to treat him as if he were not a Christian at all. This is the third necessary wounding the apostle comments on. From Paul's perspective all three of these incidents---the visit, the letter, and the restriction of this individual---had taken place in the past, and now he is going to explain them.

Let us see what we can learn from his analysis. Second Corinthians 1:12:

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace. For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.

Wounds scrutinized

Wounding your friends is never an enjoyable thing. The ministry of challenge is always undertaken with difficulty. Whenever we engage in it, we are open to review ourselves. Paul realizes that he had to examine whether his own motives were right. He asked himself whether he was going to Corinth to correct them because he was going to get something out of it for himself. He had had his feelings hurt, without doubt. Was he being revengeful in return? Was he seeking to put down someone in order to raise himself up? Was he seeking money, authority, or position? What was his conscience saying to him?

As he refers to these woundings which he felt compelled to inflict on the Corinthians in the past, Paul uses the language of the courtroom. Note, for example, the words "our conscience testifies" (1:12); "I call God as my witness" (1:23). In open court, he first places his own motives under scrutiny, and concludes that he had conducted himself in "holiness and sincerity"; the "grace of God" had moved him to so act. "Holiness" speaks of that which is unstained; "sincerity" speaks of that which is unmixed, so that truth and error are not sewn together into the same fabric. The apostle had acted on behalf of the Corinthians, not on his own behalf.

In verses 13 and 14, however, it is clear that Paul realizes the Corinthians may not entirely welcome what he had to say. What he had written was clear and quite understandable, but they had understood only in part; some day they would understand more fully. He can only tell them that his conscience is clear; he does not expect them to grasp his reasoning entirely yet. They may believe of him worse than is true, at least for a time, but that does not in any way remove from him his certainty that what he did was done for the right reasons.

I have always liked the comment that has been attributed to Mark Twain to the effect that when he was sixteen or seventeen, he thought his father was a fool, but by the time he was twenty-five he was astonished at how much his father had learned in the interim. There is a lot of this kind of sentiment in the relationship between the Corinthians and the apostle Paul. We have already likened it to the relationship between a father and an adolescent child. And even though Paul says he is not difficult to understand, the adolescent child, for all the obvious reasons, replies, "I can't understand what you're saying." But Paul, the father, says, "One day you will." He leaves it at that, refusing to bear down any further. So, having examined his conscience, Paul shares his conviction that his motives were right.

The importance of empathy

Following this first question of himself, Paul asks another: Did he enjoy hurting them? Granted he was not promoting himself, but there is another element that goes with the ministry of saying hard things to your friends. You must be able to empathize with them, to feel what they feel. You cannot take perverse pleasure in seeing someone go through pain in order to get well. Paul raises this possibility, and he answers it in the next section, beginning with verse 15:

Because I was confident of this, I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. I planned to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, "Yes, yes" and "No no"? But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

Let's try and make sense of this rather complex passage, the main point of which seems to be an explanation of why Paul did not come to Corinth when the Corinthians thought he would. Throughout the passage we have several references to the apostle's attitude toward them. He begins by saying his original intention was to come to Corinth twice so that he could bless them twice. Paul was in Asia Minor, collecting money to take back to Jerusalem. His original plan was to go to Corinth, then north to Macedonia, south again through Corinth, and on to Jerusalem.

But he realized that things between himself and the Corinthians had worsened to such an extent that he changed his plan. He went to Macedonia first, sending his emissary Titus ahead of him to try and patch things up between them, and planned on visiting Corinth on his journey south to Jerusalem. Note, however, that both the original travel plans and the later change were made with the intention of doing good to the Corinthian believers. He did not enjoy inflicting wounds upon them, but rather did everything he could to avoid bringing unnecessary grief to them. He specifically denies any desire to lord it over their faith (verse 24). He longed to bring them joy, not sorrow. He did not want to be seen as an authoritarian who barged in, ready to apply discipline every time he visited Corinth.

Finally, in 2:4, the apostle says poignantly, "For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you." When we must confront our friends, we should check our attitude toward them. Confrontation should not come easy for us, and we certainly must not take any pleasure in it. If someone we love is in pain, then our eyes should well up in tears of empathy. It may be necessary that we go ahead and wound our friend because there is no other way to remove the veil. Exposure to the bright sunlight of one who has been wearing blindfolds hurts. But the friend who inflicts the wound must also feel pain.

Thus Paul first checks his motives. Was this merely a self-serving exercise for him? The answer is no. Next, his attitude. Was he willing to suffer and hurt along with the Corinthians? Of course he was. He loved them.

Answering accusations

Paul realizes that there is a backlog of accusations against him in Corinth. His detractors are already in place there, accusing him of double-mindedness. We have an example of this in 10:10: "For some say, 'His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.' Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present." His accusers were saying, "Yes, Paul is tough in his letters, but when he finally appears in person, he doesn't amount to much. He is of little stature, inconsistent, and his speech is unimpressive." They were using his change of plans to accuse him of double-mindedness. Thus, Paul explains why he decided not to go first to Corinth. To diminish unnecessary hurt he sent Titus to them first--to begin the healing process between himself and the Corinthians. Only then would he visit them. That was the only reason for his not coming. He was not irresolute, as their accusations suggested.

The friend who inflicts the wound must also feel the pain

Another accusation made against him was that he was deliberately duplicitous---not just that he was shallow and vacillating, but that he was a snake-in-the-grass who could not be trusted, the kind of person who said "Yes yes" and "No no" at the same time. But that was impossible for someone who could write, as the apostle did in 1:21, "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."

It is impossible to minister faithfully in Christ's name and be untruthful at the same time. God is unchangeable. He does not promise something and then fail to deliver. The answer to all of God's promises are "Yes" in Jesus. Paul is asking, "How could I possibly represent God if I am a liar, if I am a man-pleaser who tells people what they want to hear? If that were so, I would long since have lost whatever ministry I have."

At our elders meeting last week, I was trying to propose a motion, and as I fumbled and mumbled along, one of the men turned to me and asked, "Do you mean yes or no?" I laughed, because I had just been studying this passage. I realized that what I was trying to do was word my motion in such a way that if what I proposed upset anyone I could deny it, and if it pleased some I could take the credit. I was trying to say yes and no at the same time. "Spin doctors" is what they call people who do this in Washington. These spokesmen spring into action when politicians make pronouncements which offend certain people or groups. They put a "spin" on what is said to make it palatable to everyone, saying yes and no at the same time.

The Feinstein - Van de Kamp Democratic debates for governor of California are a good case in point. Feinstein declared her opposition to abortions being performed for the purpose of sex selection. These are not pregnancies resulting from incest, rape, poverty, or the usual difficult cases which are so widely quoted. These children are wanted, planned for, and desired-but are extinguished for being the wrong sex. Having made the sensible statement that she is troubled by this, Feinstein came under attack from pro-abortion critics. Immediately she reversed herself to agree with her critics. The mood of the country at the moment seems to be that any "Yes" or "No" answers are unpopular. Politicians as a result are being forced to take neutral positions on all the moral issues. When some protest spending public monies on pornographic art exhibits, we hear counter-protests about First Amendment rights being endangered. The public seems to want to hear "Yes yes" and "No no" at the same time.

But not the apostle Paul. To him, God has made very clear statements about himself and his purposes. The resounding "Yes" to every promise of God is Jesus Christ, and the answer of the church should be "Amen" to the "Yes" of God. Paul recoils from any suggestion that he is double-minded, needlessly wounding "innocent" Corinthian believers.

Restricting a rebel

The third and final case of wounding concerns a certain man who had been restricted from fellowship by the church in Corinth. It is probable that Paul had urged them to take this action against this man who, it seems, was dividing the body there. Chapter 5, verse 2:

If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to

some extent-not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive him and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven-if there was anything to forgive--I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

We can sense Paul's hesitancy in his language here. He was not unaware of what had occurred in this case. What he is trying to do is counter any thought that he is angry, personally hurt, or is seeking revenge. I believe that the apostle was personally attacked by this individual. He was grieved by him, as was everybody else. But Paul says that the punishment he had already endured was enough. There must be an end to this process of wounding. Any challenge, probing, unmasking, any tearing away of bandages must have restoration in view as the end result. There cannot be any joy in this process. Things must proceed to where there is health, restoration, and full acceptance. This is what Paul is suggesting here. A brother in Christ must not be caused so much unrelenting hurt that he is an easy mark for the lies of Satan. There must be an end to the confrontation.

In this section, the apostle is looking back on three events in which he participated in the wounding of Christian people. He paid a visit to Corinth which resulted in grief and tension; he wrote a letter to the church which was an indictment of their conduct; and finally, he agreed with the punishment of an individual who was threatening unity in the church. But in each of these three cases Paul's last word concerns not wounding, but restoration. His painful visit would not be his last visit among them (already, as we will see, he was on his way to visit them once more); this very letter of love (not the letter of reprimand) would be his last letter to them; and the individual who had been disciplined should be welcomed back into fellowship among them. Healing and restoration had been made possible.

Restoration

Wounds from a friend can be trusted because they have good as their ultimate end. Doctors probe their patients to discover why illness is present, and they prescribe medication or restriction so that healing may take place. Surgeons cut, inflicting pain in the process, so that they may make people well. They wound in order to heal.

Jesus said he was a physician of the soul. Luke's gospel relates the following incident from the life of our Lord:

Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Jesus said that he came to make things right again, to "call sinners to repentance." I commend to you the ministry of spiritual surgery in service of Christ (and openness when the Doctor works on you). If your motives are right, and if you are willing to share the hurt of the wounded, this is a ministry we as the people of Christ need to grow in.

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