

Salt & Light

Fall 2007

The Newsletter of the Social Concerns Ministry Team

Educating and informing the church body in light of biblical principles

You are the salt of the earth...
You are the light of the world...

Mt. 5:13-14

Editorial Note:

One of the most puzzlingly persistent problems in the church is conflict. Its persistence is puzzling, not because it is surprising to find sin in the church, but because it is curious that people are so willing to let sin remain uncontested among God's people in the body of Jesus Christ. If unity is a mark of the Holy Spirit, then we might expect conflict resolution to be high on people's agenda. This issue of *Salt & Light* examines why that is often not the case, and how the church can do better.

The opening article by WBC Senior Pastor Charles Moore exposes some of the excuses that keep people from following the clear counsel of Jesus on this matter. Brian Schwertley extends that discussion to additional excuses that lull believers to inaction. One of the many helpful articles on the Peacemaker Ministries web site then discusses what biblical responses to conflict look like. Ken Sande's concluding piece provides a case study of a church divided by peace-breakers and peace-fakers, showing how peacemakers can make all the difference.

Conflict Resolution: Excuses, Excuses

By Charles Moore

If a brother or sister sins, go and point out the fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

—Matthew 18:15-17

As the Apostle Paul opened his first epistle to the Corinthians, he no doubt was grieved by the lack of harmony that threatened to undermine the ministry and witness of his fellow believers there. I think that Paul was deeply saddened as he considered the extent to which the church was settling for anything less than being "perfectly united in mind and thought." Surely those same divisions among that body also grieved the heart of Jesus Christ, who had given His very life to make them one.

When I examine the culture of today's evangelical churches – and my own congregation – I am similarly heartsick. It's not that I don't see the many good things that are happening. But beyond all of those, I also see a prideful rebellion against the Scriptures. Perhaps nowhere is this more startling to me than in the church's response to the simple teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17. With excruciatingly painful irony, that is the very Bible passage that could set us free from the bitter spirit of divisiveness that seeks to rip us to shreds.

What does Jesus have in mind for the church in this straightforward text? An

atmosphere of self-righteous judgmentalism and cold, cruel condemnation? Not at all. The aim of our Lord's teaching here is that we would become *truly* united. The kind of unity for which He prayed on our behalf in John 17. Not just a theoretical unity expressed in some kind of verbal profession, but a very practical unity lived out among the Lord's redeemed in now-we-really-understand-each-other kinds of ways. A grace-inspired and grace-filled unity.

Christ's teaching ought to hit us like a velvet-covered brick. We ought to feel the punch and then get on with the noble task of reconciliation. But we don't usually do that. Instead, we junk what Jesus taught before we get past the first verse.

The sad reality is that – if we were actually to obey what Jesus instructed – 99% of the conflicts within the church would be resolved with no further advancement of the process that we dread. After all, who looks forward to a situation requiring "church discipline"? But we would rarely get there if we would seek to win over our brothers and sisters in the amazingly simple way that Jesus has given us to

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Prior issues of *Salt & Light* available at www.wbc.org

Conflict Resolution: Excuses, Excuses

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love them. That's right, Matthew 18:15 is pure love. At least it should be.

What I'm saying is that all of us, from time to time, allow ourselves to wiggle out from under the clear command of our Lord in Matthew 18:15. The reasons sound plausible at first: "That Mrs. Pumpnickel has been told about this problem of hers for decades. She hasn't listened to anyone else, so why would she listen to me?" Or, "Mr. Sourdough is a very emotionally compromised man. He won't handle the truth well, and I really must involve some others

before I deal directly with him. Just for prayer support of course!"

What we often fail to realize is that – when we buy into pitiful excuses like these – we have passed judgment on the Scriptures and belittled our Lord. Not a place I want to be! May God grant us the grace to simply trust Him and obey Him instead.

And when I fail to do that – and I will – I need someone to come to me with Nathan-like candor and say: "Charles, you're the man." I'm not likely to truly appreciate such pointed honesty when I most need it – and neither will you – but

my soul needs to hear the truth. Because the truth is my only real hope for genuine and enduring change.

The disunity that threatened the Corinthian Church in Paul's day is no less a threat to us. It should break our hearts and drive us to our knees. And then it should drive us off our knees and into the living room of our brother or sister with whom we have work to do! Will we obey our Lord Jesus, or will we seek to pursue our own short-sighted remedies for a disease that only He can cure? †

More Excuses

From: Brian Schwertley, www.reformedonline.com

1. *I do not have the time to go to my brother.* Although it is certainly preferable to go and speak to a brother face to face, there are circumstances that may arise that would justify the use of a telephone to speak to your brother. The fact that we have telephones in our modern culture effectively eliminates this as a reasonable excuse....Furthermore, if you believe the sin is so serious it must be confronted then *you are biblically obligated to make time....*

2. *If I confront my brother about his sin, is this not judging my brother? Doesn't the Bible say "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matt 7:1)?...* The same Jesus who said judge not, also said, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24). If one examines the context, Jesus is condemning the hypocritical, harsh, and unmerciful judgment meted out on people that was a common practice among the Pharisees....The idea common in our day that people are to judge no one is absurd. If applied consistently, this would lead to chaos in society; for if no one can judge then family discipline, church discipline and civil courts

would all cease, and all prisons would be emptied.

3. *Isn't confronting my brother about his sin unloving?* Unfortunately, many in the modern church have adopted a pagan false definition of love. Love is defined primarily in a feel-good, emotionally based manner. Love is seen as letting bygones be bygones, as sweeping sin and false doctrine under the rug....Is telling the person who has cancer which needs to be removed, that everything is fine the loving thing to do? Of course not!...

4. *I do not want to go to my brother because I hate conflict....* Ignoring sin because one hates conflict does not

eliminate conflict, it only postpones it. Sin and heresy will act as a cancer upon the body of Christ if not dealt with and removed. Dealing with sin immediately actually involves less conflict, for sin is dealt with before it spreads and causes more damage....Obeying Christ's command to go to your brother eliminates the sinful tendency of people to gossip and damage a brother's reputation. It is very common for people who disobey Christ's command, to tell all their friends about the offense....Our love toward Jesus Christ and our erring brother must take precedence over our hatred of conflict. †

Biblical Responses to Conflict

From: Peacemaker Ministries (www.hispeace.org)

The Gospel Is the Key to Peace. A true peacemaker is guided, motivated, and empowered by the gospel, the good news that God has forgiven all our sins and made peace with us through the death and resurrection of his Son (Col. 1:19-20). Through Christ he has also enabled us to break the habit of escaping from conflict or attacking others, and he has

empowered us to become peacemakers who can promote genuine justice and reconciliation (Col. 3:12-14)....

[Biblical responses to conflict] are directed at finding a just and mutually agreeable solution to a conflict. These responses may be divided into two categories: personal peacemaking responses

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Case Study: Peace-breakers, Peace-fakers, and Peacemakers

From: Ken Sande, *Life Truths Family Bible Study*

Differences over worship styles had plagued First Baptist Church for nearly two years. The issue had been debated for countless hours in leadership and congregational meetings, but it only served to deepen divisions and intensify emotions.

On the surface it seemed that the church was divided between the "traditional" camp and the "contemporary" camp. But if you listened carefully to the recurring discussions, you could group the congregation along much different lines.

Many of the people in both music camps were responding to the conflict in an "attacking" or "peace-breaking" manner. They were absolutely sure that their respective views were correct, and they felt justified in doing whatever was necessary to force others to accept their positions. Although they were not deliberately trying to hurt others, their insensitivity, careless words,

and judgmental attitudes had deeply wounded many people.

Others in the church could be grouped together as "escapers" or "peace-fakers." They disliked conflict and preferred to avoid controversy. Some simply denied that there was a conflict, while others stayed away from congregational meetings. When

Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.

-- Proverbs 17:14

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Biblical Responses to Conflict

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and assisted responses.

Personal peacemaking responses are carried out in private between the parties themselves. Although it is appropriate for one or both parties to seek advice on how to implement these responses, they should normally try to resolve their differences one-on-one before asking others to intervene in the dispute.

Overlook an offense—Many disputes are so insignificant that they should be resolved by quietly and deliberately overlooking an offense. "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense" (Prov. 19:11). Overlooking an offense is a form of forgiveness, and involves a deliberate decision not to talk about it, dwell on it, or let it grow into pent-up bitterness or anger.

Reconciliation—If an offense is too serious to overlook or has damaged our relationship, we need to resolve personal or relational issues through confession, loving correction, and forgiveness. "[If your brother has something against you ... go and be reconciled]" (Matt. 5:23-24). "Brothers, if someone is caught in

a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Gal. 6:1; see Matt. 18:15). "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13).

Negotiation—Even if we successfully resolve relational issues, we may still need to work

Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

-- Ephesians 4:26-27

through material issues related to money, property, or other rights. This should be done through a cooperative bargaining process in which you and the other person seek to reach a settlement that satisfies the legitimate needs of each side. "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4).

If the parties cannot resolve a dispute through personal peacemaking, they should pursue one of the **assisted responses**. This will require that they seek help from other people in their church or community.

Mediation—If two people cannot

reach an agreement in private, they should ask one or more objective outside people to meet with them to help them communicate more effectively and explore possible solutions. "If he will not listen [to you], take one or two others along" (Matt. 18:16). These mediators may ask questions and give advice, but they have no authority to force you to accept a particular solution.

Arbitration—When you and an opponent cannot come to a voluntary agreement on a material issue, you may appoint one or more arbitrators to listen to your arguments and render a binding decision to settle the issue. "If you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church" (1 Cor. 6:4).

Accountability—If a person who professes to be a Christian refuses to be reconciled and do what is right, Jesus commands his or her church leaders to formally intervene to hold him or her accountable to Scripture and to promote repentance, justice, and forgiveness. "If he refuses to listen [to others], tell it to the church" (Matt. 18:17). †

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Case Study

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they could not avoid being drawn into a discussion about the disagreement, their standard plea was, "Can't we all just get along?" Eventually many of them simply fled from the church altogether.

Neither of these groups could restore peace in their troubled church. On the contrary, the church was being steadily robbed of its unity, joy, and gospel witness by the tensions, slander, denial, and loss of members.

Fortunately, there is a third group of people whom God delights to use when conflict threatens the welfare and witness of his people. They are called peacemakers, and their ranks include spiritual giants like Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Abigail, Solomon, Daniel, Esther, Peter, Barnabas, and Paul. And at the head of this noble company stands the ultimate peacemaker, the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Peacemakers are distinguished

from peace-breakers by their deep concern for relationships (Eph. 4:1-3) and "the wisdom that comes from heaven [which] is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17). These people know that many offenses and differences should be overlooked (see Prov. 19:11; Luke 9:51). They are willing to accept others and look out for others' interests even if their disagreement is over significant matters (see Rom. 15:5-7; Phil. 2:1-4).

Peacemakers are distinguished from peace-fakers by their

willingness to candidly discuss conflicts that are too serious to overlook. This discussion may include confession and forgiveness, loving confrontation, respectful instruction or debate, and thoughtful negotiation (see Prov. 28:13; Eph. 4:32; Matt. 5:23-24; 18:15; John 3:1-21; 4:1-26; 2 Tim. 2:24-26; Dan. 1:1-16; Phil. 2:3-4). When differences cannot be resolved in private, peacemakers will not give up; instead, they will seek guidance from other believers and submit themselves to the counsel and discipline of the church (see Matt. 18:16-20; 1 Cor. 6:1-8; Acts 15:1-35). †

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