

# BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE PEACE OF CHRIST

(Pr. Herbert Mueller)

## WHERE DO WE START?

When Christians allow a conflict or an offense to destroy relationships God has given us, it tears at the body of Christ and becomes an offense to the Gospel itself. Christ anticipated that the sinners (forgiven to be sure, but as long as we remain on this earth possessing a "sinful flesh") who would make up His Church would need His direction in restoring broken relationships in His peace and living in His forgiveness. Matthew 18:15-20 and Matthew 5:23-24 give specific direction in this regard.

## MATTHEW 18:15-20

*"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.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by My Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in My name, there am I with them."*

## "IF YOUR BROTHER ..."

What Jesus says applies to all relationships, but especially to those between members of a church fellowship. The Scripture says, *"Do not by your [actions] destroy your brother for whom Christ died"* (Romans 14:15). Even more than a brother, he (or she) is a member of Christ's body (Ephesians 5:30). Every person baptized into Christ is connected with Christ. Therefore, we are told, *"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace"* (Colossians 3:15). We cannot allow anything to divide us from one another, for that divides Christ! (See also 1 Corinthians 1:13).

## "IF YOUR BROTHER SINS AGAINST YOU..."

What are we going to do when sin does divide us, or bring offense between Christians in our fellowship? These are the five steps (drawn from Matthew 18:15-20) we will follow. Please note, **the goal is never to win the argument, but always to win the brother back**, to be reconciled in the relationship. Here are the steps, briefly (explanation follows).

**STEP ONE** -- One on one, face to face meeting(s) between you and the other conflictor, alone. (If successful, go to step five.)

**STEP TWO** -- Bring other witnesses to help you listen to each other. (If successful, go to step five.)

**STEP THREE** -- Ask for more help from the Church so that you can be reconciled. (If successful, go to step five.)

**STEP FOUR** -- Ask a third party to create a solution and impose it. (This becomes much more difficult, but, if you are successful, you still go to step five.)

**STEP FIVE** -- Be reconciled to each other as you, with the forgiving power of Christ, leave the sin in the past, and create a new relationship with Christ as center.

## WHAT ARE THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES HERE?

**Personal solution** -- Those who live with the solution are better off creating it themselves.

**Initiative** -- Each one involved should go to the other. Do not wait for someone to come to you, but if you

realize there is a conflict, you need to go to the other. *Compare Matthew 18:15 with Matthew 5:23- 24.*

**Redundancy** -- We have more than one opportunity and one way to work on a conflict. Each step needs to be exhausted before going to the next.

**Relationships** -- The relationships God gives in Christ are primary. The basic question to ask always is "What does our relationship need?" *See Matthew 18:19.*

**Immediacy** -- Do it right away. The Bible says, "*Do not let the sun go down on your anger.*" (Ephesians 4:25) When there is a broken relationship among just two of its members, the whole church suffers. All are connected together within the body of Christ.

**Rooted in Christ's Means of Grace** -- Christ Himself offers, gives and seals to us the forgiveness of all our sins in the Gospel (read, proclaimed, taught), in our Baptism (and when we return to Baptism through Confession and Absolution), and in Christ's Body and Blood, given and shed for us in His Supper.

**STEP ONE** -- **One on one, face to face meeting(s) between you and the other conflictor, alone. (If successful, go to step five.)**

*"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" (Matthew 18:15). "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).*

**Please note four things about these two passages:**

- a) When you take them together, the Lord's direction is the same, whether it is your brother's fault, or your own fault -- **You go**, and be reconciled.
- b) You go right away! Don't go telling others of the offense and don't be running each other down. Simply say to each other, "There is something between us we need to straighten out right away. It cannot wait."
- c) You keep on going to each other until the relationship is restored. There is no limit to the number of times you go.
- d) You go alone. "*Just between the two of you*" means just that. Both of you must be committed to keeping all communication regarding the conflict limited to the two of you. If others are supporting your mutual efforts, they are to know only two things: (1) That both of you are meeting in good faith and when (2) you have been reconciled.

**When you meet**, focus the discussion on what the offense is doing to your relationship, not on whose rights may or may not have been violated. Assure each other that you are not in the discussion to win an argument, but to restore a relationship.

- 1) Begin with a brief prayer by each participant.
- 2) Ask each other, "When did our situation really begin to bother you?"
- 3) Without accusing or blaming the other, and without defending yourself, establish the facts. Ask, "What happened that undermined our relationship?" Sort it out.
- 4) Then ask, "What does our relationship need? What needs to happen so that the relationship is back on track, even though we may never see eye-to-eye on all things?" Speak words of forgiveness when appropriate. **But do not part until you have at least agreed when and where to meet again.**
- 5) Bring your agreement before God in prayer. Jesus promised, "*Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by My Father in heaven*" (Matthew 18:19).

**Go to step five below.**

However, if it becomes clear after several sessions that you are not making progress, you may, by mutual agreement, go to Step Two.

**STEP TWO -- Bring two or three other witnesses to help you listen to each other. (If successful, go to step five.)**

**In step two you go through all the parts of step one**, only this time with the help of faithful witnesses who will make sure that you are listening to each other.

"Witnesses" **are not** three friends who will help you support your side of the argument. "Witnesses" **are** people of good character, agreed to by both sides, who will listen to the conflictors to help them understand what is really happening and to point them to the possible solutions they have already discussed.

**Witnesses...**

- show the support and encouragement of the whole Body of Christ for peace-builders.
- make sure each conflictor is proceeding in good faith (in case you have to go to later steps).
- ask the conflictors, *"Tell me what your relationship's real needs are."*
- testify to the need for more help from the church, if reconciliation is still not possible.

**When you are successful, go to step five.**

If not, you may need step three:

**STEP THREE -- Ask for more help from the Church so that you can be reconciled. (If successful, go to step five.)**

This can take several forms.

- 1) Professional expertise to help work out a situation. The professionals, of course, need to be Christian.
- 2) Encouragement from the church. Find ways to diminish the conflictor's isolation or sense of going it alone and reinforce their persistence in the sometimes lengthy process of building on God's gift of peace in Christ.
- 3) Extend Christ-Care to each of the conflictors. Do not take sides but pray for those involved in conflict and reinforce the need for reconciliation.

*"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:1-2). "For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him. For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." (Romans 12:3- 5).*

**STEP FOUR -- Ask a third party to create a solution and impose it. (This becomes much more difficult, but, if you are successful, you still go to step five.)**

*"Tell it to the Church"* that good-faith use of all prior steps has been exhausted without success. The conflictors have been unable to create a solution themselves despite everyone's hard work, persistence, and best efforts. A third party needs to create a solution for the conflictors so they can also go on to step 5 eventually. Options for third-party solutions include:

a) The elders recommending those who are impenitent for excommunication. Why? So they may see the seriousness of their sin and offense and repent and be reconciled. Jesus says, "Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." What did Jesus do for Gentiles and tax collectors? He went to them, bringing the word of repentance and forgiveness.

b) If a rostered pastor or teacher is involved, here is where the District is brought in for help in finding and imposing a solution.

c) Bring it before the council and/or voters. However, be careful. **Unless it can be verified that all three previous steps have been exhausted in good faith, the chairman of the meeting must rule that this overture is out of order** and must specify the conflictors go back to step 3 or 2 or 1 and possibly suggest other help for those who brought up the matter. Only when steps 1, 2, and 3 have been completely exhausted to you go to step 4. And even when you have completed step 4, effort still must be made for Step 5.

d) The secular courts. Christians normally do not take their disputes before the secular courts because to do so often brings only disgrace upon the Church. (*I Corinthians 6:1-8, especially verse 7, which reads, "To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?"*) Going to the secular courts essentially involves asking a third party **outside the Church** to create and impose a solution for a problem **within the Church**. Often the courts will not hear a Church case, telling the Church to go back to Matthew 18. But if the courts do hear a lawsuit related to the Church, the answer usually satisfies no one. **That is because we must always somehow come to Step 5** (reconciliation and forgiveness) for an issue to be closed within the Church. Even when a person is excommunicated by the Church, the desire is always that the unrepentant sinner turn from his sin to receive forgiveness.

**STEP FIVE -- Be reconciled to each other as you, with the forgiving power of Christ, leave the sin in the past, and create a new relationship with Christ as center.**

*"Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."* (Matthew 18:19-20).

This declaration establishes the eternal foundation which verifies the great promise for conflict redemption. Christ is present when we do it in His name. Where Christ is present, true forgiveness is made certain. Confession and Absolution, corporate or private, also brings Christ's forgiveness to each of us in an individual, personal way. We believe Christ Himself, by His Word of forgiveness spoken through a fellow Christian, sets us free. *"If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed"* (John 8:36).

**Affirmation of the reconciliation** is especially appropriate and desirable when the solution has been achieved at one of the first three steps of Matthew 18. The conflictors have created their own solution. That is something to be celebrated and encouraged by them, by others it affects, and by their church, especially when their preceding difficulties were well known by other members, neighbors, and acquaintances.

Affirmation includes: 1) Encouragement of others to use redemptive strategies in their own conflicts. 2) Regard for these persons' renewed relationship. How do we approach and relate to them since we no longer need to walk on egg shells about their "thing", for example. 3) Support further continuing efforts to sustain and strengthen their agreement in the bond of peace. *"And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."* (Colossians 3:15-17).

When full reconciliation does not take place, we continue to pray and work for that end. The door is always to be left open, even when the congregation has had to excommunicate. Reconciliation is always the goal. May God bless our efforts in this as He has promised to do.

+ In the Name of Jesus +