

## GUIDELINES FOR CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT (Andy Fleming May 2008)

### I. UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE AND SOURCES OF CONFLICT

- A. The Reasons for Human Differences Are Natural and Understandable
  - God has created each one of us differently and wants each member of the body to be respected and appreciated by the others (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:12-31). *Some of our differences are innate and God-given.*
  - We have also experienced different processes of character formation and to varying degrees reflect the values and norms of the cultures around us—"there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). *Some of our differences are learned.*
- B. A Certain Level of Conflict Is Normal and To Be Expected
  - Although some interpersonal conflicts can be the direct result of sinful attitudes like selfishness (James 4:1-3), many conflicts are rooted in the genuine differences between people's experiences, abilities, personalities, and ways of thinking.
  - Therefore, the presence of conflictive situations in the church community must be considered normal and in some cases even seen as evidence of healthy social interaction and genuine relationships.
- C. Individual Differences (not including sinful behavior or attitudes) Should Be Respected, Appreciated, and Accepted
  - Although the origins of our differences may be innocent enough, there is often a great temptation to react selfishly, pridefully and self-righteously towards each other.
  - In Romans 14:1-15:7 Paul gives some important guidelines for having the right attitudes and expectations when dealing with personal differences:
    - "Do not pass judgment on disputable matters" (14:1);
    - "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind ... doing so to the Lord and giving thanks to God" (14:5, 7);
    - "[Determine] not to put any stumbling block ... in your brother's way" (14:13)
    - "Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil" (14:16) since *good* theology can be rendered ineffective and unproductive through *poor* presentation;
    - "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (14:19);
    - "Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves ... everything that does not come from faith is sin" (14:22-23). People need to conform for the right reasons and not simply succumb to the pressure of stronger personalities;
    - "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves" (15:1);
    - "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you..." (15:7)—individual, non-sinful differences need to be accepted.
- D. God Can Work Through Conflictive Situations to Bring About Positive Changes
  - "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).
  - Confrontation has always been one of God's ways for character transformation in his people, but the agents of change must guard their hearts from becoming arrogant or self-righteous (Gal 6:1-5).



## II. REVIEW OF THE BIBLICAL RULES FOR 'DEALING WITH UNREPENTED SIN'

- As already noted, some conflicts can be the direct result of sinful attitudes and behavior, while others are the result of misunderstandings and suspicions due to the inherent differences between people's experiences, abilities, personalities, and perceptions.
- A review of the biblical instruction concerning how we are to deal with unrepented sin has a two-fold benefit:

- Establish the right boundaries where 'sound instruction' and 'calls to repentance' may need to precede mediation attempts;
- Suggest similar principles for dealing with conflict arising from issues other than specific sins.

### A. Christians Are Called by God to Be Proactive and Make the First Step

- "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" (Matt 18:15).
- "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that you 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" (Matt 5:23-24).
- *Whether someone has sinned against us or we have sinned against someone else, we are obligated as disciples to make the first step towards reconciliation.*
- *Such steps need to be approached with humility since the initiator is operating from the assumption that his/her observations and conclusions are correct—which may or may not be true!*

### B. If the First Step Fails, Involve Others (the Second Step)

- In dealing with a brother who has sinned against you, "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' [Deut 19:15] (Matt 18:16). This Old Testament principle of "one witness not being enough to condemn a person" (Deut 17:6, 19:15) is repeated in New Testament instructions for dealing with sin in the church community (2 Cor 13:1-3, 1 Tim 5:19-20).
- Making accusations against others must be considered a serious action and should never be done lightly. And if we are convinced that someone is not responding to our initiative, then we must be willing to go further and involve other witnesses.
- "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently, But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (Gal 6:1). As we involve others, we must be careful not to 'lead the witnesses' and color their perceptions. Everyone must remain mindful of God's presence, judgment and mercy since "the first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him" (Prov 18:17).

### C. If the Second Step Fails then Church Discipline Follows

- After involving more witnesses, "if he refuses to listen 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" (Matt 18:17).
- Paul outlined a similar process in Titus 3:10, "warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him." Sadly, there comes a point in the process when only a strong demonstration of discipline can help bring someone back to repentance. "Do not withhold discipline from a child; ... punish him ... and save his soul from death" (Prov 23:13-14). Strong discipline is an evidence of true love (Heb 12:5-11).
- When Paul heard that the Corinthians were tolerating blatant sexual sin in their congregation, he abbreviated the process with an immediate challenge to the whole congregation, "when you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Cor 5:4-5; cf. 1 Tim 1:20).
- Paul also went on to explain to the Corinthians that the act of withdrawing fellowship is also for the good of the congregation since the toleration of sin can ruin the spirituality of others around them (1 Cor 5:6-11).

- Paul later followed up this instruction with direction of reaffirming their love for the brother who sinned—"the punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him" (2 Cor 2:5-11).

#### D. Observations

- The biblical process for dealing with unrepented sin provides some good principles for managing conflict in the church:
  - Each Christian must take responsibility for their own actions and convictions. If they are offended by another they should approach that brother or sister first without involving others. (At this point, even seeking advice might be inappropriate since the supposed 'offender' has still not been given an opportunity to speak with the offended).
  - If two Christians cannot be reconciled to each other unaided, then others need to become involved in the situation. At this point, the existence of an already established process and commonly held principles is very important and would alleviate the problem of trying to establish ground rules under duress. Therefore it behooves a local leadership to establish a process for managing conflict that sets up common expectations and safeguards against partiality or favoritism in a particular situation.
  - The invitation to open communication and self-expression can never become an excuse for sin. Expressing one's hurt can easily become self-indulgent and each party needs to be careful to not fall into sins like impatience, slander or bitterness. The power of personality can easily become as divisive as false doctrine (3 John 9).
- "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live a peace with everyone" (Rom 12:18). The local church needs to make every effort to empower her members to reconcile their conflicts and manage their expectations.