

Christian Conflict

Matthew 18:15-17

Preface

Illus: In recent years a new type of glue has hit the market. It is called "Gorilla Glue". And the same company has now introduced "Gorilla Tape." Some of their advertising reads: "Gorilla products work when others fail" - "Helping people around the world build and repair" – "Bonds together like no other glue"

Jesus Christ is the Gorilla Glue of the church. Jesus helps us build and repair our lives. He bonds us together in common spirit with His love, grace and Holy Spirit. There is nothing like the church when the church is united in spirit and serving God.

When we are united in His spirit, we are united in our goals, objectives, beliefs and direction. But when we are divided, when there is conflict among us, the work of our Lord is hindered.

Scripture

¹⁵ "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. ¹⁶ 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.' ¹⁷ 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. Matthew 18:15-17

Introduction

Illus: In one Peanuts comic strip, Lucy demands that Linus change TV channels and threatens him with her fist if he doesn't. "What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?" asks Linus. "These five fingers," says Lucy. "Individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold." "Which channel do you want?" asks Linus. Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?"

I have found that Christian people often do not handle conflict well. When people get their feelings hurt or get offended, they rarely handle the matter the way God would have it be handled.

Some people deal with conflict by bottling it up inside. Others handle it by telling everyone they can with the exception of the person who offended them. Still others make threats and demonize the offending party. None of the methods are Biblical.

Illus: A mother ran into the bedroom when she heard her seven-year-old son screaming. She found his two-year-old sister pulling his hair. She gently released the little girl's grip and said comfortingly to the boy, "There, there. She didn't mean it. She doesn't know that hurts." He nodded his acknowledgement, and she left the room. As she started down the hall the little girl screamed. Rushing back in, she asked, "What happened?" The little boy replied, "She knows now."

When someone hurts us our natural tendency is to hurt them back. But this is not Biblical. God's word is perfectly clear on the matter of how conflicts should be handled by Christians.

Content

1. Conflicts should first be kept private.

Notice that the first step in resolving conflict is to keep the matter private. When we fail to handle conflict privately or when we take our complaints to other people, we're in direct disobedience to God's instruction. This leads to unnecessary hurt feelings and damage to the Church that could have been avoided.

I have seen more damage done when someone gets offended and then goes around talking about it to everyone except the person who offended them. It is easy to discuss the matter with everyone else but the right thing to do is to go to the other party. Put simply, if you aren't willing to sit down and discuss the matter with the person who offended you, then just shut-up about it.

We should approach the person who sins against us privately and speak with them alone. It is possible that he/she doesn't even realize what they have done. Approach them with the intent of reconciling with them rather than winning an argument. It is of no gain if you win the argument but lose the relationship.

Approach the other party with an attitude of gentleness and seek to restore the relationship. In other words, approach the other party the way you would like to be approached.

I personally have never seen this step fail to work. It usually results in a stronger relationship between the two parties. As Christians with the love of Christ in our hearts, we can resolve any conflict if we follow God's instruction.

2. Unresolved conflict requires witnesses.

There may be times when the offending person refuses to make things right and you are not able to resolve the matter. In such a case, we are free to share the burden with one or two dependable believers as witnesses.

We should share the facts as we see them and ask them for their prayerful counsel. After all, it may be that we are wrong. If the witnesses feel the cause is right, then together we can go to the offender and try once again to resolve the matter.

Not only can these fellow believers assist in prayer and persuasion, but they can be witnesses to the church of the truth of the conversation (Deut. 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1).

When sin and conflict is not dealt with honestly, it always spreads. What was once a matter between two people has now grown to involve four or five people. No wonder Jesus and Paul both compared sin to spreading yeast.

Please notice that this is step two. Most conflict can be resolved privately without ever burdening others with the problem. Most people do just the opposite; they take their side of the story to everyone else before going to the other party.

3. Ultimately conflict must be addressed by the church.

When conflict or sin cannot be resolved, it becomes necessary for the church to take action. This action is called "church discipline." Church discipline is taught here and several other places in the Bible (1 Cor. 5; 2 Thes. 3:6–16; 2 Tim. 2:23–26; Titus 3:10).

Illus: In working with the By-Laws Committee, we came to the section on church discipline. The question was asked, "Do we really need this in here since it seems so negative." My response was yes we do.

As painful as it may be, there could be a time when the entire church must deal with a matter using church discipline. I have never been a part of a church that had to resort to church discipline. However, we must understand that such action is Biblical and therefore must remain an option.

Remember, our goal is not the winning of a case but the winning of a brother or a sister in Christ. But, church discipline is a necessary action to maintain the spirit and unity of the church.

Illus: I remember speaking with a local Pastor one day. I mentioned that one of his members had joined our church recently. He responded by saying, "I have a few others I would like to send your way."

Now he was joking but the truth is that there are some church members who are not happy unless they are stirring up trouble or complaining about something. Put frankly, sometimes the trouble-maker just needs to leave.

If by the time the matter comes to the whole church, the offender has not yet changed his mind and repented, then he must be disciplined. He cannot be treated as a spiritual brother, for he has forfeited that position. He can only be treated as one outside the church, not hated, but not held in close fellowship.

Conclusion

Christians are obligated by God's word to handle conflict in the manner outlined in the Bible. We are to love one another and we are to foster unity within the fellowship.

In Ephesians 3 Paul writes, *"¹As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."* Ephesians 3:1-3 NIV

Our faith does not exempt any of us from sin or making mistakes. None of us are perfect. But a little gentleness and forgiveness can minimize the impact of sin and conflict within our family.

Illus: As you know, Pam and I have two children. They are both grown now. I do not like to have conflict with either of my children. I prefer to always have a good relationship with both of them and it hurts anytime we have unpleasant words. But what hurts me even more is when they have conflict between each other. As their father, it is my desire that my children be close with one another and get along well.

God feels the same way about the church. It must disappoint God greatly when His children do not get along. God desires for us to have unity and work together to accomplish His work.