

Maintaining Healthy Church Family Relationships

Disagreements and Upsets

Any disagreements or upsets in our relationships with each other in God's family should be addressed in accordance with the teaching of the Lord Jesus as recorded in Matthew chapter 18 verses 21 to 35. The underlying message of these verses is that we have each received total forgiveness in Christ and are therefore commanded to forgive others as we ourselves have been forgiven.

1. When others hurt us...

Because we are human, there will undoubtedly be times when we are upset or hurt by the words or actions of someone else in the fellowship. When this happens, we may think that the other person should come and apologise, but actually it is our personal responsibility, if we feel offended, to explain this to the one who has hurt us and to seek reconciliation.

Often it is wise to wait for 48 hours, to pray and only then, if you are still upset, to arrange to talk through what has happened with the other person. Encourage a two way discussion - explain your feelings, listen to their explanation and it may be that their explanation will clear the matter between you. If not, seek to restore your relationship in love and seek to forgive as you have been forgiven by God.

If your relationship is restored, all well and good; but what if the other person refuses to accept that they have caused offence and the matter is left unresolved?

It would be tempting to leave things as they are at this point; but generally this leads to a distancing between brothers and sisters in the fellowship and the spiritual harmony of the church can be damaged. Therefore it is important to continue to seek reconciliation.

Matthew 18 v 16 is the key verse. The Lord Jesus counselled us to take one or two folk along with us to see the other person. These should be mature and impartial Christians who will not be seen as our "heavy mob" but folk the other person respects and trusts. Their role is to help bring reconciliation and peace.

The matter can then be aired again in love, with the witness or witnesses in place. Again the hope is that the outcome will be a restoring of the relationship.

In the rare case that the relationship is still not restored, then the church is to become involved (v 17). This is likely to mean that 2 church leaders will seek to mediate and to bring a resolution. If it is clear to the leaders that one has clearly sinned against the other and that there is flat refusal to repent of the action, then, and only then, disciplinary action may be considered by the whole church in order to communicate the serious need for repentance and out of a loving pastoral concern for the offender's spiritual welfare.

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2. When we hurt others...

It's as likely that we will hurt someone else in the fellowship at some time or another as it is that someone else will hurt us.

If someone comes to you and says that you have hurt or upset them - listen to what they say. Even if you believe that you have done nothing wrong, listening to them carefully may in itself be a healing act. Be aware that they believe what they say and that their feelings are real.

Seek to be reconciled and explain your actions. If you have done something wrong, apologise and aim not to do it again. Seek to restore your relationship and, if you need to, be quick to forgive, just as God has been quick to forgive you.

3. Generally...

We all need to take personal responsibility for reconciling our damaged relationships and to do so at an appropriate level. Hurts left unresolved fester and diminish our relationship with God and with one another; they distract us from our mission to make disciples and serve God in the world and play into the hands of the enemy who seeks to tie up ministries with internal disputes.

In this crucial area of church family life, we need to recognise that disagreements and upsets happen in every fellowship. We should aim high in our relationships with each other but not seek to over dramatise events when they happen. The challenge is not that these things happen (they undoubtedly will!) but how we handle them. The depth of love in a fellowship is not assessed by how often we hurt one another but how often we forgive one another.

Discipline

A. Basic Principles:

i. We are all sinners saved by grace. The Christian life is a constant spiritual battle and, because we love each other in Jesus' name and Jesus' love is a redemptive love, we need to look out for and guard each other. We continue to sin and continue to be in need of God's grace. No-one is without sin. Some people are aware of their sin, repent and change, but others can be unrepentant and don't see the need to change.

ii. In Matthew chapter 18 verses 15-17, in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 verses 1-13 and in James chapter 5 verses 19 -20, the common teaching is that any disciplinary action taken by the church should come out of a love and a deep concern for a person's relationship with God.

iii. Church discipline can only apply to Christians. We should not expect people who are not Christians to understand, appreciate and abide by Christian teaching and standards. Our first concern for those who are not yet saved is to see them put their faith in Christ; belief

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comes before behaviour.

iv. Where church members are concerned it is the teaching of Matthew 18 that is most important: If a brother or sister sins against you or you see a brother or sister sin, go and show them their fault, just between the two of you. If they will not listen, take one or two others along. If they still refuse, tell the elders. The elders, together with another member of the leadership team if necessary, will go and talk to the person and raise the matter with them.

v. The issue of church membership should only be raised as a very last resort. A number of outcomes may come from the Elders' involvement:

- If the member repents of the sin and takes steps to change, then no further action is required. If the matter is public knowledge then the Elders will tell the church of the person's repentance. If the matter is not public knowledge then there need be no public statement.
- If the person does not repent, the Elders will continue to meet with the person and will use their pastoral discernment as to how long the process of discussion should last. That will depend on the particular situation. Should they feel that there are no signs that the person will repent, then the Elders will make a recommendation to the church meeting that the person's church membership should be suspended. The aim of the suspension will be to communicate the serious spiritual implications of the person persisting in sin and so seek to encourage a change of heart. It should not be vindictive but part of a strategy of redemptive love. It will also act so as to guard the integrity and honour of Christ's Body, the church. We are all part of Christ's Body and refusal to repent of sin is dishonouring to the Body of Christ. (See note below for the details of the suspension process)

B. Suspension process:

Any suspension of Church Membership will be recommended by the Elders to the church meeting. If a person's church membership is suspended, they will not be eligible to vote at church meetings and will need to relinquish church ministries for the period of suspension.

Their membership will be restored as soon as there is repentance and the Elders will take the responsibility of interviewing the person and communicating the restoration of the brother or sister to the church meeting. Even though a member may be suspended, the Elders will make it clear to the person that they will always be welcome at the church; but that they will need to examine themselves before continuing to take Communion.