

Reconciliation: Healing Wounds in a Relationship

I set it down as a fact that if all men knew what each said of the other, there would not be four friends in the world. -- Blaise Pascal

PRINCIPLES OF RECONCILIATION

The Necessity of Reconciliation

Reconciliation requires that we not be content with leaving conflict and sin unfaced in our relationships with one another. (Dick Keyes)

Christians are commanded to seek peace and reconciliation with "all people" (Hebrews 12:14a; Romans 12:18), not just Christians. Therefore, any two Christians in an unreconciled relationship are required by God to seek and effect reconciliation, since they are under God. By the word "seek" we mean initiate; each Christian is responsible to begin the process of reconciliation, regardless of "who started it". (Matt.5:21-26; Matt.18:15ff). As leaders, we need to be quick to reconcile and quick to help others.

The Basis of Reconciliation

God reconciles us to himself through Christ. He finds a way to put our sins away so the relationship with him can be restored (II Cor. 5:20-21). The ministry he gives to the church is a reconciling ministry (II Cor. 5:19). God's commands to forgive others are grounded in his forgiveness of us. The Matt.18:15ff passage on reconciliation is followed by the parable of the unmerciful servant, which teaches that the mercy of the king to the servant **MUST** be reflected through the mercy of the servant to fellow servants. *Because God refuses to let sin destroy relationships, so must we.*

THE ELEMENTS OF RECONCILIATION

Repentance

Repentance in reconciliation consists of three parts: 1) confession to God, 2) confession to the person wronged, and 3) an offering of a concrete plan for change that avoids the sin in the future (Luke 3:7-14).

Some kinds of confession that do not lead to reconciliation:

1. Confession is not the same as asking to be excused. To ask to be excused is to say: "The real cause for the loss you suffered was not really me." Example: I was late because someone stole my wallet.
2. Confession is not a plea for sympathy. Some confessions are designed to be painful catharsis that is a way to a) relieve one of guilt feelings (the confession is a kind of atonement/punishment), or b) get people to provide lots of sympathy.
3. Confession is not to be light-hearted or flip. It can be done in a way to preserve pride, to technically fulfill the requirement, to get one off the hook, but to do it without any true admission of blame.
4. Confession is not a veiled attack. Often the confession is done in such a way as to show the other person in the worst possible light. "If I upset you, I am sorry."--is in this category. It means, "if you were a normal person you would not have been upset by what I did."

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is granted first, and felt later (Luke 17:3-10). It is granted whether the person in the wrong repents or not (Mark 11:25). Forgiveness is a promise 1) not to bring up the wrong again to the person, 2) not to bring up the sin to others, and 3) not to bring it up to yourself.

What does it mean to "not bring it up yourself"?

1. It means not to dwell on it in the heart, and not to re-play the "videotapes" of the wrong in your imagination, in order to keep the sense of loss and hurt fresh and real to you. *"[Forgiveness] is to deal with our emotions by sending them away--by denying ourselves the dark pleasures of venting them or fondling them in our minds."* -- Dan Hamilton, *Forgiveness*
2. It means not to hold the person liable anymore for the debt, but rather to absorb the cost. Every sin makes someone lose something. There is a loss--a debt. If a friend breaks my lamp and I forgive him, the debt does not go into thin air. When I forgive him, I absorb the cost and payment for the lamp. To forgive is to cancel the debt by paying it yourself. When God "remembers our sins no more", it does not mean he loses consciousness of them. Rather, he no longer holds us liable for them, for he has absorbed them himself on the cross. He no longer acts toward us as if we owe them. To forgive means to absorb the cost, the loss incurred, and to not demand any further payment. We treat the person as free from obligation to us.

"Once upon a time, I was engaged to a young woman who changed her mind. I forgave her...but in small sums over a year...done when I spoke to her and refrained from rehashing the past, done whenever I renounced jealousy and self-pity when seeing her with another man, done when I praised her to others when I wanted to slice away at her reputation. Those were the payments--but she never saw them. And her own payment were unseen by me...but I do know that she forgave me....[Forgiveness] is more than a matter of refusing to hate someone. It is also a matter of choosing to demonstrate love and acceptance to the offender...Pain is the consequence of sin; there is no easy way to deal with it. Wood, nails and pain are the currency of forgiveness, the love that heals." -- Dan Hamilton, *Forgiveness*

Some things that forgiveness is not:

1. *It is not accepting an excuse.* A good excuse eliminates the need for forgiveness. It shows the person never owed us, the cost is not from him or her.
2. *It is not a whitewash.* Forgiveness is not pretending a sin is not a sin. It is not denial or pretense that it did not happen. Forgiveness always entails a full measure of the debt and the cost, not a denial of it.
3. *It is not condescension.* There is a way to say, "I forgive you" which is really a proud way of rubbing the other person's nose into it. Real forgiveness is canceling the debt, not making the person pay through the confession! *"Pride won't allow forgiveness; forgiveness won't allow pride"*. If you cannot forgive, it is because you are sure that you are not as sinful as the person you are mad at.
4. *It is not merely a refraining from active revenge.* Many say, "I forgive but I cannot forget." That usually means, "I won't actively seek to harm you now, but I will treat you with coldness and so on because you still owe me." Forgiveness is canceling the debt--NOT merely making the person pay it back in smaller installments.
5. *It is not suspended judgement.* Don't say, "I'll forgive you this time, but next time I'll take your head off." That means: "I am counting this against you, but it is not enough for revenge yet. But I am keeping it in your account."
6. *Forgiveness is not the same as re-trusting.* Until a person shows evidence of true change, we should not trust the person. To immediately re-trust a person with sinful habits could actually be enabling him to sin. Trust must be restored, and the speed at which this occurs depends on the repentance of the offender. (See below, "Restoring" and see above, the third element in repentance.)

How can we forgive?

1. By looking at God's commands to forgive. Our obligation.
2. By remembering God's forgiveness of us. We have no right to be bitter.
3. By remembering God's omniscience is necessary to be a just judge. We have insufficient knowledge to know what others deserve.

4. We are defeated by sin when we allow the offender to keep us in bondage through bitterness! (Romans 12--defeat evil with forgiveness)
5. We undermine the gospel when we fail to forgive.

Restoring

Reconciliation is not over when we have merely forgiven the offender, but we must also be willing to restore him or her. Galatians 6:1ff tells us we are to help restore a person "caught in a trespass". Restoring the person would also mean restoring the relationship. The speed and degree of this restoration entails the re-creation of trust, and that takes time, depending on the nature and severity of the offenses involved. Part of real repentance usually means asking: "what could I do that would make you trust me?" and being willing to accept the answer. Part of real forgiveness means being open to the possibility of lasting change in the offender and being truly unbiased and willing to offer more trust little by little.

Next Steps

If a person you are seeking to reconcile with (seeking to repent and/or forgive) will not be reconciled, or consistently fails to truly repent and/or forgive, and if that person even continues to mistreat you--

- a. you must respond by overcoming evil with good (Romans 12:14ff)
- b. you must not make it easy or possible for the person to continue to sin against you (don't "cause him to stumble"),
- c. you may, if you are both part of the same fellowship, go to other Christians and eventually the leaders of the church to enable reconciliation (Matt.5; Matt. 18).

THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

Matthew 5 Track

1. Pray and practice. Go prepared to speak of your sin and your responsibility first.
2. Begin: "It appears to me you there is a problem between us; am I wrong? Please tell me what you think I have contributed to it." Or "Here is what I know I have contributed to the problem--where I have sinned. Now could you tell me what else I have done that I have not seen?"
3. Respond:
 - (a) Repent (see above) for everything and anything the person says that is just. Even if there are exaggerations, extract the real fault and confess it. Even if only 10% of the problem is you, admit it. Provide plans for changing behavior. Ask if there is anything to do to restore trust.
 - AND/OR (b) Explain. If after humble self-examination, there are some things mentioned you really do not think you can honestly confess as sins, after you have repented, give some explanation of the other accusations. Then say, "Can you accept my point of view?"
4. After this, you may need to use Matt 18 track, but often it is better to wait and see if your Scriptural approach doesn't elicit confession from the other without you having to extract it.

Matt 18 Track

1. Pray and practice. Confess anything you contributed to the problem.
2. Begin your Christian criticism: "This is how it looks to me. From my point of view you did this...this... and it effected me this way...this way... I am coming to ask you if my understanding is accurate or distorted. Correct me if I am wrong. Could you explain what happened?" Be sure your list of things he/she has done is specific, not vague. Have a loving and humble tone. Attack the problem not the person (e.g. Not "You are so thoughtless", but "you have continually forgotten this after repeated promises").
3. Suggest alternatives and solutions for alternative courses of action or behavior. Make sure all criticism is constructive.
4. Offer forgiveness, but avoid using the term unless asked for! See above on how to avoid forgiveness that alienates.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

The "power" of church discipline is the authority of the church to instruct and guide the members of its community in their faith and life.

FOUR STAGES: FROM GENERAL (INFORMAL) TO FORMAL

1. Self discipline (Informal)

Stage 1 of church discipline is mentioned in Galatians 5:23, *Egrakteia*, often translated, "self-control" is the new authority a believer receives from the Holy Spirit over his/her own self. It is the peace and inner harmony that occurs when there is integration between one's heart and one's conscience. Self-discipline often begins with gritting one's teeth and denying/repressing inner urges (e.g. when you want to hit someone). But spiritual self-discipline is only complete when the unruly heart is persuaded by the truth, melted toward God, responding in obedience through grateful joy.

"Self-discipline is the beginning and the end of church discipline, because it is the most basic element in all discipline. It is discipline [in maturity]. Discipline begins in a child's life as discipline by other....the process of child discipline that the Bible sets forth is one in which the control of parents is gradually replaced by the control of the Spirit through the Word....The mature person obeys not for fear of punishment or hope of reward [primarily], but out of gratitude to God who sent the Saviour to die." (Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*, p. 41)

Self-discipline is "the beginning" of church discipline. That is, 99.999999% of the discipline going on in the church is individuals using the Spirit's authority to mold their hearts more and more into the image and character of Christ's. The other forms of church discipline are merely "back up" to self-discipline by the Spirit. On the other hand, self-discipline is "the end" of church discipline. That is, if others must go and confront and counsel with a Christian regarding his or her faith and life, the goal is not mere compliance, nor good riddance, but a return to inner spiritual self-discipline--persuasion and love. "The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." (I Timothy 1:5)

2. One-on-one discipline (Informal)

Stage 2 is mentioned in Matthew 18:15 (cf. parallel passage Luke 17:3 and context): "if your brother sins against you, go and convict him of his sin privately, with just the two of you present. If he listens to you, you have won your brother." This verse uses the case of someone sinning against you, but Galatians 6:1 tells us that we are to institute one-on-discipline also if the sin is not "against" us: "if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently". (For the moment, we will treat this step generally, leaving out the issue of forgiveness and reconciliation if the person's sin is vs. you.)

What we learn from these two texts:

1. This discipline is not optional. It is a command. Matthew 5:23-24 make the "go" required for you if you think you sinned against someone; Matthew 18 makes it required for you if you were sinned against, and Galatians 6 makes it required if you are put by God in a position to observe a habit pattern.
2. We are to go if the person is "caught" in a sin. It means there should be a habit pattern, something he or she is not making progress about. One-on-one discipline should not be "hair-trigger". Proverbs 10:12- "love covers a multitude of sins"
3. Initial approach must be private. You are not to talk about the person's sin broadly at all. Every effort is to be made to keep the discussion as narrow as the offense. (This does not mean you can ever promise total and absolute confidentiality, since if a person is unrepentant, discipline must go "higher".)
4. Initial approach must be humble and even tentative. (Luke 17:3 actually says approach your brother and *epitimao*, "rebuke him tentatively". Say, "as far as I can tell, this is wrong, but I am ready to be corrected by you if I am misunderstanding it."
5. The purpose of the approach is always restoration or reconciliation. "restore him" (Gal. 6:1) "you have won your brother" (Matt. 18). A simple apology is not all that is

the goal--you want a relationship re-established. On the one hand, trust can only be rebuilt gradually, and neither party must insist that reconciliation means an immediate restoration of the same intimacy and trust that existed before. But on the other hand, a expression of apology accompanied by a complete break in personal relations, a coldness and distance, is not allowed by the Scripture.

NOTE: Mark 11:25 - "When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins." Luke 17:4 - "if your brother sins, rebuke him [tentatively], and if he repents, forgive him." Is there a contradiction here? No. Complete forgiveness and reconciliation occurs when you grant 3 things: a) No bringing up the offense to you the offender, b) no bringing up the offense to others, c) no bringing up the offense to yourself. Mark 11 demands forgiveness in the "narrow sense" regardless of the repentance of the person. You must grant (c)--you cannot be bitter, rehearsing the offense, filling heart with coldness or ill-will. You must pray for those persecute you, etc. But forgiveness in the "fullest sense" (a, b, and c) can only be granted if the person repents. Another way to put it is that you can "forgive" an unrepentant person, but you cannot be "reconciled" nor completely "forget" with an unrepentant person.

3. Group discipline (Informal)

Stage 3 is mentioned in Matthew 18:16. "But if he won't listen to you, take one or two others so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." We learn from this text:

1. The third stage is triggered by the words, "if he won't listen to you". That is always, the trigger for the next stage. If a person won't listen to the Holy Spirit alone, you talk to him. If he won't listen to you, get a small group to talk to him. And so on. This shows that you stay in a stage until you are sure the refusal to listen is genuine, solid. One meeting can make tempers flare and lead to intemperate statements. You must allow the person to cool off or you may decide you were insufficiently gentle. For all sorts of reasons, you must be willing to try a number of times. (There is the opposite danger, of waiting so long to go to the next level that the "trail is cold".)
2. The purpose of the 2 or 3 others is to be counselors who now have two "sides" to listen to. Later on, if there is no resolution, the 2-3 counselors may become witnesses if the matter has to be formally brought before the church.
3. The counselors should be people who are wise and mature, who have the personal respect of one or more of the parties. If the counselors are officers of the church, they must make it clear that they are acting as private brothers and sisters and not in the capacity of representatives of the church.
4. Before going, the counselors should not do much talking to the complaining party (abbr. CP) that recruited them, to avoid gossip and "talking a brother down behind his back" (James 4:11). Every effort should be made to tell the alleged offender (abbr. AO) that the counselors are not there to "gang up" on her or him, and should mention that they have not allowed negative discussion to go on before the appointment.
5. When the counselors meet with the two parties, a good procedure could be this:
 - (a) First listen to the CP who feels the AO is in the wrong. Be sure that the complainant has a real motive of concern for the AO, and is really going about things in a way that leads to restoration of fellowship. Look for unsubstantiated accusations and harsh tone. Gently rebuke the CP if they are present. If the CP really does not have much evidence or substantiation, cite I Cor 13 "Love thinks no evil" i.e. gives the benefit of the doubt. Urge the CP to drop the accusation. Urge both parties to forgive for indiscretions.
 - (b) If the CP is cogent and concerned and the evidence is there, listen to the AO, seeking to get him/her to respond to the CP as much as possible. Be sure to distinguish from real offenses and mere misunderstandings. (Clear out the misunderstandings so the substantial issues can be focused upon.) If there has really

been an offense, seek to counsel the AO with how to rectify her or his behavior or attitude. Urge repentance, forgiveness, and whatever is required Biblically.

(c) If one or both parties will not accept the counselors decision and the unreconciled relationship and/or the wrong behavior continues, the counselors should try for a time to bring the persons around. When that fails, they can "tell it to the church".

4. Church discipline (Formal)

Finally, official discipline occurs. It is formal, the church officially deals with the offending sister or brother. Jesus statement "tell it to the church" gives us fewer specifics about this stage of discipline than any of the others! As a result there is more difference of opinion about what should be done here than in any other area. For the purposes of the cell leader/ministry leader, this part of the outline can be brief.

1. If an offense is a public scandal, discipline can an must start at this level. (See I Corinthians 5:1).
2. A person's offense must be told only "to the church". Worship services in which plenty of non-Christians are present are not the place for discussion of offenses and discipline.
3. To "tell the church" means to either tell the membership at a closed meeting or to tell the elders as representatives of the church. Biblical basis: Exodus 3:15-16; 19:3,7; Deut 31:28,30. Frequently the elders represent the whole people before God. The "assembly of Israel" and the "assembly of elders" are the same. In many churches, therefore, the elders operate as reps of the church. They function as official counselors as outlined in the last step above. The difference is that, if the person(s) will still "not listen", the alternative is removal from membership.
4. It is clear that a person is never disciplined or removed from the church simply for sin. He or she is disciplined for contumacy, for refusal to repent.
5. How a removed-from-membership person is to be regarded is the proper object of continued discussion, reflection, and Bible study. Such person is not banned, however from worship services. The aim is still to see softening and repentance.

VARIABLES TO CONSIDER

Speed

The speed with which these stages are moved through depends on several variables:

1. Member versus non-member.
2. Longer time a Christian versus newer Christian.
3. Leader or person in responsible position versus someone with few or no ministry responsibilities.
4. Hardness and hostility versus teachableness, tenderness of conscience

Formal "Censure"

The forms of "censure".

1. Removal from leadership/ministry position.
2. Formal rebuke.
3. Suspension from Lord's supper.
4. Removal from membership

CHURCH DISCIPLINE: WHAT IS AN OFFENSE?

When do you "go"? "*When your brother sins against you...*" undoubtedly does not mean every and any sin. So when do you go? "An offense, the proper object of judicial process, is anything in the doctrines or practice of a Church contrary to the word of God."

HCD Page 35 - Not all differences of belief or interpretation call for disciplinary action. There are beliefs that are so seriously wrong, they would call for discipline, but other beliefs, though erroneous, do not. Here is a most difficult area--judgement call without a firm boundary. Thus others may disagree with you that this offense "calls for disciplinary action". Wisdom is necessary to determine serious heresy from intramural differences.

Page 52 - Love covers a multitude of sins (Proverbs 10:12). To cover sins, or to "overlook an offense" (Proverbs 19:11b), is a glorious thing....No, any offense that doesn't get between us and the one who committed it--does not need to be raised. But...anything that any matter that throws love's covers off must be brought up. Of course, if the sin which your brother commits against you is debilitating to him and he is not dealing with in adequately in his own life, you may have to raise the matter anyway, on the basis of Galatians 6:1-2, even if you yourself could overlook the matter. Both in overlooking or in bringing up matters for the sake of another, it is important to be very sure of your motives; these are areas in which you may easily deceive yourself.

RECONCILIATION AND DISCIPLINE RESOURCES

Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Baker, 1991). He also has a helpful brochure that summarizes his approach to reconciliation. Call the office for a copy.

John White and Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded: The Costly Love of Church Discipline*. (Inter-Varsity Press, 1985)

Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*. (Baker, 1986).

Lynn R. Buzzard and Laurence Eck, *Tell It to the Church: Reconciling Out of Court*. (David C. Cook, 1982)

Don Baker, *Beyond Forgiveness: The Healing Touch of Church Discipline*. (Multnomah, 1984)

Daniel E. Wray, *Biblical Church Discipline*. (Banner of Truth, 1978)

Warham Walker, *Church Discipline* (Utica, NY, 1844)