

Pursuing Unity in the Local Church

The Bible expects that Christians will have conflict—every early church did—and therefore, it continually calls us to forgive, love, and work for peace (Eph 4:31-32; 1 Cor 1:10). We have all suffered broken relationships, and so we must now work with all our might to “preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). When we live in harmony, God pours out his blessing (Ps 133).

Therefore, we invite every leader to commit to the following guidelines:

Handling conflict directly

- With God’s help, I will accept that conflict is a reality any time people come together, including in the church. Therefore, I will not run from it, over-spiritualize it, or deny it; I will face it with God’s help and demonstrate courage and overcoming love. In that way, conflict can actually become something that helps us grow.

By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (Jn 13:35).

- With God’s help, if I sense tension with someone, I will go to that person and ask, “Is everything okay between us?”

Live in harmony with one another (Rom 12:16).

- With God’s help, if I am hurt by or angry with a leader or another member, I will do the best and hardest thing: go privately to that person and talk about it. I refuse to do the worst and easiest thing: talk about it to others in the church—even as a prayer request or concern. (The lone exception: if I need perspective and prayer in order to go to the person who hurt me, in which case I will speak to only one person, a spiritually mature person to whom I’m accountable.)

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs (Eph 4:29).

- With God’s help, when someone sins against me, I’ll do my best to follow the conflict-resolution guidelines in Matthew 18.

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 (Matt 18:15-17).

Handling other people’s concerns

- With God’s help, I will remember that every situation has two sides. I commit to not accept or believe any negative report, no matter who gave it, until I have gone to the other person and asked to hear his or her perspective.



The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him (Prov 18:17).

- With God's help, when I need to pass on information or criticism, I will not do it anonymously or under the label "Many people feel"; instead, I will name who gave that information or who felt that way. With names attached, conflict can be directly addressed before it spreads.

Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body (Eph 4:25).

- With God's help, I commit that if I hear someone speak an unkind word of criticism or slander against anyone, I will not do the worst and easiest thing: listen and empathize with how badly the speaker has been treated. Instead, I will do the best and hardest thing: ask the person to go directly to whomever he or she is criticizing or complaining about. I will do this even if it makes me seem uncaring or that I don't really understand. And if the person hesitates, I will offer to go with him or her.

LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? ... He who speaks the truth from his heart and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman (Ps 15:1-3).

Handling different convictions

- With God's help, when I am more permissive on an issue, I will not exercise my freedom in a way that offends or distresses someone who's more restrictive on that issue. When I am more restrictive on an issue, I will not condemn someone who's more permissive on that issue as less spiritual. Instead, I will hold and express my convictions in a way that "aims for harmony in the church and builds others up."

Those who think it is all right to eat anything must not look down on those who won't. And those who won't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them... It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall (Rom 14:3, 21).

Honoring leaders

- With God's help I commit to obey the church's leaders and submit to their authority, as the Bible commands, knowing that this alone will prevent many conflicts.

Obey your spiritual leaders and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they know they are accountable to God. Give them reason to do this joyfully and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit (Heb 13:17).

- With God's help, and knowing that the most common and dangerous accusations come against leaders, I will not take seriously or respond to those unless they are brought by two or three witnesses. And then I will encourage the witnesses to go directly to the leader in question.



Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses (1 Tim 5:19).

Upholding unity

- With God's help, I will hold dear the unity of the communion table by going, before the service or during the welcome, and ask forgiveness for the way I have hurt someone.

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 (Matt 5:23-24).

- Since being divisive is one of the few things serious enough to warrant being separated from the communion of the Church, with God's help, I will work for unity in the following ways (Titus 3:1): "be subject to rulers and authorities, be obedient, be ready to do whatever is good, slander no one, be peaceable and considerate, and show true humility toward all men." If I am thinking about leaving, I will meet with a staff member to express honestly why I am thinking about that. If I am disciplined by the church's leaders, I will stay and show by my repentance the power of God to restore.

Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him (Titus 3:10).

- With God's help, when (not if) I am hurt by another person in this church, I will work to forgive the person fully.

And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you (Eph 4:31-32).

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matt 6:14-15).

Seeking healing and forgiveness

- With God's help, I will work to consider others better than myself, since that attitude alone will build unity.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves (Phil 2:3).

- With God's help, I will "put myself at the head of the sin line," focusing more on how I need to change than on how that other person (who's bothering me) needs to. I will regularly confess my sins, both in public worship and in gospel community.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst (1 Tim 1:15).

Do not judge, or you too will be judged (Matt 7:1).



- With God's help, I will seek to grow as a Christian in love, forgiveness, and handling conflict, through means such as healing prayer, counseling, resources on relationships, and seeking pastoral care.

Dear brothers and sisters, we always thank God for you, as is right, for we are thankful that your faith is flourishing and you are all growing in love for each other (2 Thess 1:3).

- With God's help, and knowing I am learning and will often fall short, when I realize I have not abided by these guidelines, I will ask for God's forgiveness. Then I will go to those who were affected and ask their forgiveness, too.

If we confess our sins to God, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong (1 Jn 1:9).

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