

PURSUING PEACE

Dealing with disagreements

in Churches and among Christians

By John Benton

Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Anger in the church	3
Chapter 2: Disagreements over Essential issues	7
Chapter 3: Disagreements over Personal issues	11

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Introduction

Trouble in evangelical churches and between evangelical churches is frequent and tragic and one of the greatest causes of discouragement to my own Christian faith let alone that of others. The church, which ought to be the joy of the whole earth Psalm 48.2, is often a far from beautiful place. So, pursuing peace in the church is very important. That is what this booklet is about. We begin with some preliminary remarks.

Church connections

First, this subject of handling conflict is given in the context of our Association of churches[1]. So, I will try to apply it with that in mind. In recent years we have had a measure of conflict. But if we are going to approach disagreement in the right spirit the first thing we need to ask is, 'do we prize our Association?' Is it something we look upon as just a necessary umbrella – which on some days we can do without – or is it something vital we are really committed to? If the reader belongs to some other group of churches or denomination you must ask yourself the same question. 'How much do I value our church connections?'

We certainly find that in the NT the churches had concern for one another, 2 Corinthians 8&9; Colossians 4.13 etc.

Unity not uniformity

Second, have we realized that Scripture calls us to unity but not to uniformity? There is unity in the Trinity but also diversity – the Father is not the Son etc., though all three Persons are God and constitute one God. And similarly, while there is to be unity in the churches and across the churches by way of the truth of the gospel and the fundamentals of godly living – not every Christian has to be exactly the same as every other, not every church has to have the same ethos as ours. Homogenous people groups tend to be in-grown, exclusive and subject to the pitfalls of 'groupthink' from which we need saving. Are we committed to diversity within proper unity in church and in Association? Is there freedom and humanity among the churches, or would we be more comfortable being part of a cult where everyone must be precisely same? The Lutheran theologian Rupertus Meldenius seems to be

[1] Much of this material was initially given at the Grace Baptist pastors' overnighter at High Leigh Conference centre in 2023

the original author of the rule: ‘In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.’

Indwelling sin

Third, have we realized that indwelling sin makes us all prone to pride, which means as individuals, we are naturally programmed *not* to handle conflict well? It is interesting that in Acts 15 we meet two conflicts. One is doctrinal and one is personal. The NIV gives very similar wording for both; ‘sharp dispute’ v2 between Paul and the Judaizers over legalism versus the gospel; v39 ‘sharp disagreement’ between Paul and Barnabas over whether John Mark should be again included in the mission team. Though the doctrinal issue was settled comparatively quickly, it seems that the personal dispute took a lot longer to clear up, 2 Timothy 4.11. We have to look at ourselves.

Having first recognised that anger does have a place in the Christian life, we are going to divide our thoughts between the two sorts of disagreements we find in Acts 15. I will call them ‘essential issues’ and ‘personal issues.’

Chapter 1: Anger in the church

As we think about pursuing peace as Christians and churches, perhaps the place to start is to admit that we do get angry. Sometimes the biggest problem in dealing with conflict and bringing peace is that we are in denial over the issue of anger. We pretend it's not there as Christians, church leaders or churches. 'We are too spiritual to ever get angry', we like to tell ourselves. But that is nonsense, it is not reality, and we should know it.

The apostle Paul shows no such diffidence in owning up to the fact that Christians get angry. His well-known advice is, 'In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.' Ephesians 4.26, 27 (NIV) Anger will arise. But what should we do with it?

Translations

The NIV is rather uncomfortable with the original Greek in v26. The Greek says, 'Be angry and do not sin' (ESV). In other words, there is a legitimate place for anger, sometimes its right to be angry, so 'be angry'. But in handling it, avoid sin. However, the NIV sentence 'In your anger do not sin' gives a rather different impression. It almost implies that there is no place for it at all.

The truth is there is bad anger – ignited by selfishness and pride – and there can be good anger set off by concern for others, for justice or God's glory. Wasn't Jesus angry, Mark 3.5, when he wanted to heal the man with the shrivelled hand, but the Pharisees were ready to condemn him for breaking the Sabbath if he did? And of course, isn't God himself right when he is angry with sin? So, there is a right place for a proper anger in the Christian life and in the church. But Ephesians 4.26, 27 is telling us it has to be handled wisely, quickly and carefully. It is certainly not the kind of thing to let loiter around in your heart as a Christian.

It has to be handled very carefully, because the devil is very slippery. You see if you ask something like 'Is the devil against sin?' you would think the answer is obvious. 'He's not against sin, he is for sin.' But that's not quite how it is. When you are contemplating committing that sin of course he's for it. 'Everyone does it,' he tells you. 'It's only small. It doesn't matter. God will forgive.' But then after you've committed that sin what does he say? 'That was terrible! You've gone too far this time! There's no way back for you.' He switches sides. He is now so 'righteous' and ready to accuse. He pushes you one way then the other. He's not for or against sin.

He's against you and against me. He is against God. He's against the churches of our Lord Jesus Christ. And with anger too he can push us both ways.

These verses set before us three temptations, three sins with respect to anger.

***First,* the sin of coldness**

Sometimes it is a sin not to be angry. You see that v26a is a quote from Psalm 4.4, 'Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds and be silent.' Like Psalm 3 the background of this following Psalm could well be the revolt stirred up by his son Absalom as he tried to take David's throne. David has a right to be angry when his own son plotted against him and turned upon him. But David knows that some of his supporters are hotheads and what v4 is saying is something like 'don't rush into foolish action, sleep on it before you act.' This initially seems to be the opposite of Paul saying, 'don't let the sun go down while you are still angry.' But the emphasis is actually different here. David is discouraging us from rash retaliation.

There is a right anger, as when Jesus overturned tables and made a whip of cords and used it to drive out the marketeers from the temple who had made it into a shopping mall instead of a house of prayer. But think prayerfully and carefully before you act. And it is very interesting that in Mark's Gospel that's precisely what we find Jesus doing, Mark 11.11, v12, v15. He saw it. He slept on it. Then he acted.

But often we don't get angry when we should. We are simply disinterested. We get angry when people hurt us, but not when others suffer. People are on the end of injustice, but we couldn't care. Another church in our group walks out on Scripture but it's not us so why worry. Our hearts are cold. We avoid anger. But in this situation, that's not how a Christian ought to be. It is a sinful coldness.

One root of this disinterestedness in rightful anger is the contemporary therapy culture that has invaded the church. For example, it is now so easy to see the good elder is the lovey-dovey cuddly one who only strokes us, and the one who gets upset about lack of commitment is the bad guy. We want happiness in the church before holiness. Jill cohabits with her boyfriend Doug. She is a church member and a Sunday school teacher and her parents are long standing members of the church and it would cause an awful upset if we said anything – so let it go. We are not interested in 'judging' others.

No. That won't do. We should be angry. Don't we care about what such a situation does to Christ's reputation? What would we be saying here? Sin is okay among those who serve in the church but not others? Where on earth, did we get that idea?

In fact, if we are cold in the face of sin and injustice, we are likely to make others feel angry at our coldness. Instead of bringing peace we are in danger of sowing more seeds of trouble.

***Second,* the sin of bitterness**

But though anger is not necessarily wrong, harbouring anger is wrong. This is the reason Paul tells us to deal with it, quench it, as quickly as possible – before the sun goes down.

As we have noticed, one way the devil wants to push us is never to be angry. Now he would push us to the other side – so we are always angry. We are determined to hold on to it. Sometimes the way things get done in a church are not helpful. People get very hurt. I was talking to someone not too long ago who has wonderfully fought through that struggle and was joking about writing a book titled 'redeeming rejection.'

If we harbour anger, we turn bitter. So be angry, decide what is right to do, but then let it go – or it will damage you and it will damage the church. Prolonged anger opens the door to the devil, Ephesians 4.27.

How can we redeem the anger of rejection in our lives? We are to think on Christ. When that injustice you have suffered is going round and round in your head you need to break the cycle. One way of doing this is to say to yourself, 'Jesus knows all about this – therefore I do not need to keep going over this myself. He will deal with it.'

This quote from Samuel Rutherford has also helped me a lot: 'Be patient, Christ went to heaven with many a wrong (still unresolved). His visage and countenance was all marred more than the sons of men. You may not be above your Master; many a black stroke received innocent Jesus, and he received no mends, but referred them all to the great court-day, when all things shall be righted.'

Here's another helpful comment from Alec Motyer 'Suffering is where we are on duty for God; it is the appointed sphere of our discipleship…When I was going

through a particular trial a friend wisely said to me "You will never pass this way again. Make sure there is something in it for Him (Jesus)."'

And bitterness will not just shrivel us spiritually but can sour the whole atmosphere of a church. The ethos of a church should be that of thankfulness, worship, love and joy – we've been saved! But bitterness will make a church a toxic place.

A friend of ours speaks of his first pastorate in the US as a young man. Fresh in the job on his first day a family asked if he would go and see them. He got to where they lived to find that they wanted to tell him about what someone else in the church did 26 years before!

And bear in mind, such bitterness destroys not only us but our children spiritually. What they hear over Sunday lunch is how bad the pastor is. If that is the case it should not surprise us that when they grow up, they take the first opportunity to quit church! Who can blame them? Instead of bitterness, harbouring anger those parents (or whoever) should have gone to the pastor, sorted it out and restored relationships.

Harbouring anger is so tempting. It makes you feel so superior and better than those others who hurt you. But don't do it.

***Third,* the sin of carelessness**

If you let the devil push you either way you are simply being careless about the spiritual state of yourself and of the church and churches.

Why are you being careless? It is because if you are never angry or always angry you are simply opening the front door to the devil and saying to him 'come on in – do what you like!' We need to oppose the devil on both fronts. And we need to do that in God's strength.

So let us be clear, we will get angry from time to time. Take it as read. But we must do the right thing and not let it simmer. We must learn to deal with disagreements.

Chapter 2: Disagreements over Essential issues

By essential issues, I mean matters of fundamental doctrine and Christian behaviour which are vital to the Christian faith. This is the first kind of disagreement we find in Acts 15. Here the priority is not relationships with people, but the guarding of the gospel and life of the Spirit – the faith once delivered to the saints, Jude v3.

Necessary conflict

We need to acknowledge that sometimes this kind of conflict is very necessary and can actually bring great benefits to the church. In the patristic period conflict brought clarity over the Person of Christ with Chalcedon. At the Reformation disagreement rescued the gospel and the truth of justification by faith alone. The evangelical revival of the 18th century really hammered home that true Christianity requires not just church attendance but new birth by the Spirit. The conflict with theological liberalism in the 19th and 20th centuries showed us the gospel is lost if we do not believe in an inerrant Bible – and churches empty. And the conflict today is with 'therapy culture' – whether what 'feels good' will over-ride what God says is good in Scripture.

Sometimes we must have conflict – we must contend for the faith. But as Iain Murray writes: The great danger is 'of Christians not recognizing when serious controversy is justified and when it is not.'[2] So, four headings follow; clarification; action; regulation; veneration.

- ***Clarification***

Top of the agenda when we suspect this kind of conflict is approaching is to discern whether or not this is a serious controversy, an essential gospel issue over which we have a duty to make a stand, or whether it is not in that category, and we must take a different approach for the sake of the unity of the body of Christ. Note here that in order to do this we need to get our facts straight – not go on hearsay. Before we proceed make sure we have properly grasped what is going on. 'If anyone gives an answer before listening, it is his folly and his shame,' Proverbs 18.13.

Are these matters essential to the gospel – as *per* 1 Corinthians 15.1-11 – things of 'first importance'. Or are they things which the Bible calls sin and need repenting of?

[2] *Evangelical Holiness,* by Iain Murray, Banner of Truth, 2013, page 121

Are we treating sin as if it were not sin? The NT is quite clear that perpetrators of such error must be opposed, 1 Corinthians 15.12, 17; Titus 1.11 etc.

As an Association of churches signed up to an agreed statement of the fundamentals of Christianity – when a church departs from the standards, they must be challenged and an attempt made to recover the situation.

- ***Action***

The procedure for this should be parallel to that spelled out for trying to recover the brother who has sinned against us in Matthew 18.15-20. We need to begin at a brotherly and personal level – with the pastor or leaders who are taking the church in the wrong direction. There are a couple of things to say here.

First, the approach insisted on here be the Lord Jesus is clearly personal. It involves face-to-face contact throughout. To try to conduct things via email, or worse, by maintaining anonymity (the anonymous letter for example) is wrong and usually disastrous. People must be respected and treated as human beings even if it turns out they are in the wrong.

Second, things should be kept private before they go public if at all possible – and living in the age of WhatsApp, email and trial by social media – that is imperative. Our first concern is to recover this pastor and his church – not hang them out to dry in public.

Brothers from within the Association should be appointed and trusted to do their work – so that while investigations and meetings are going on it does not become the gossip of every district fraternal. Every chance must be given for the matter to come to a good conclusion to the glory of God. But if there is no repentance then sadly the church must be dismissed from the Association.

Do I believe that a church should deny the deity of Christ? No. Do I think a church should actively promote gay lifestyle? No. We can't let such matters pass without failing in our duty to Christ. We must take action.

Speaking in a slightly different context Matthew Henry's Commentary says: 'The church itself is the pillar and ground of the truth (*not the other way round*). When the church ceases to be the pillar and ground of the truth, we may and ought to forsake her; for our regard for the truth should be greater than our regard for the church.' 1 Timothy 3.15.

- ***Regulation***

In these matters the Association's doctrinal statement (based on Scripture) helps us. Though it covers far more than the primary truths of the gospel – yet it does cover them. We must allow the statement of faith to which the churches have signed up, to regulate what we see as fundamental issues. And if a church has signed up to that statement, then it is not unfair to seek to hold our brothers and sisters in an offending church to that.

So, let's be more up front, teach our congregations our statement of faith and be willing to utilize it. And if a problem occurs outside the coverage of the basis – then the statement should be looked at and perhaps additional material added, updated. But the statement should regulate. It is unfair to condemn a church without proper procedure and natural justice.

Now of course, the trick that many a pride-filled firebrand young preacher tries to play is to raise every minor matter into the category of a fundamental issue – so he can fire off, let loose his macho rhetoric, and make a name for himself. There are some who delight in controversy. It gives them profile. Beware of that. Iain Murray tells of the Presbyterians in the USA who rightly rallied around J Gresham Machen in the 1930s for his stand on the trustworthiness of Scripture and formed a new denomination. But within a few years that denomination had sadly split over, among other things, whether or not the wine at the Lord's Supper should be alcoholic! Let the essentials regulate.

- ***Veneration***

Do I really believe that things like alcoholic or non-alcoholic wine at communion is worth splitting the church over? No. At this point is shown the measure of our reverence for Christ and veneration for his body. A man who sees the church as a vehicle for his own ego has no problems splitting a church – or his association – especially to rid himself of those who may question his outlook. But a man who truly loves Christ and realizes that the church is not 'his vehicle' but Christ's body will think more than twice before he takes that path.

And that's what we find in the NT. Listen to Jude v3, 'Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.' Jude is a reluctant controversialist. Contending needs to be done, but he would much rather be rejoicing in salvation and our common faith. Listen to the way Paul approaches dealing with those caught in error: 'The Lord's servant must not e quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach patiently, enduring evil, correcting

opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will,' 2 Timothy 2.25,26.

So, handling controversies over essential issues should be along these lines. And to do this as an Association requires lots of communication with each other – all being on the same page – also trust of one another – good relationships. Which brings us to our next section.

Chapter 3: Disagreements over Personal issues

We have noted that in Acts 15 that there was a doctrinal disagreement over essential truth but then there follows a personal conflict between Paul and Barnabas concerning the reliability of John Mark. So, let's look now at handling personal conflict with candour and grace under three headings. These are the Roots, Reactions, the Remedies for conflict.

Roots of Conflict

If we are going to handle conflict in a Christ-like way we need to understand what is going on. In his book *The Peacemaker*[3], which I am leaning on fairly heavily, Ken Sande fills out the roots of personal conflict by identifying four primary causes. These are a). misunderstandings; b). differences of outlook; c). competition over limited resources; d). sinful / self-centred attitudes. Of course, often our personal conflicts are a composite of a number of these.

- *Misunderstandings*

These happen. They tend to arise from poor communication. The classic instance of this in Scripture is found in Joshua 22.10-34. After the settlement in the Promised Land, the Trans-Jordan tribes – Reuben, Gad and half Manasseh – set up an imposing altar on the other side of the Jordan river, where they have chosen to live. It is read by those in the Promised Land as these tribes rebelling against God; but actually, it was the Trans-Jordan tribes' way of asserting that they are one with those across the river – worshipping the same God. And with this misunderstanding conflict looms on the horizon. War is only just averted.

This incident causes us to ask ourselves, 'have I communicated clearly?' Have I told truth in love? We need to ask ourselves, 'have I understood what that other brother or sister actually means by what I think they said?' And also, in the context of the Trans-Jordan tribes – 'do I have a tendency to judge more harshly brothers and sisters who have made different choices from me?' (Are we thinking they must be doing wrong because they chose to live 'across the Jordan!').

[3] *The Peacemaker: a Biblical guide to resolving personal conflict* by Ken Sande, Baker Books, 2004, page 30

- *Differences of outlook*

Differences of values, goals, gifting, calling, priorities, expectations, interests, or opinions can lead to conflict. In the Corinthian church there were people who idolized different preachers, Apollos and Cephas might be transformed into John MacArthur and Tim Keller – and it led to personal friction and factions and can still do so. The different legitimate spiritual gifts, handled sinfully, led to personal conflict. The eye was saying to the hand, 'I don't need you!' etc. 1 Corinthians 12.21. Don't we need the more excellent way of love? Isn't the hallmark of the unity of the Spirit the fact that He brings love across the spectrum of races, backgrounds, gifting, wealth, gender etc.? But has something about that person just nettled you? Is it that they just have a different style – which is not your style? They dress differently. They have an accent that is different from yours. They raise their children differently from the way you would do it. Because they are a little different from you – you tend to have a down on them.

- *Competition*

In Genesis we find Isaac's men and Abimelech's people quarrelling over wells of water, Genesis 26.19, 20. This is conflict over available resources. In the NT we find the disciples repeatedly vying for position in the kingdom, and who is going to land those two special (limited edition) seats next to Jesus in the kingdom, Mark 9.34; 10.37. And sadly evangelicalism generally is absolutely rife with competition – especially competition for money, for pastoral reputation, not to mention competition for the 'holy grail' of having students attending your church. Thus conflict arises. Suddenly we find ourselves giving a few below the belt comments about the bigger church and their pastor – or whatever. And that gets back to him. And now relations among the town churches or in the association of churches are strained. We have to look at ourselves. Is what I'm after really for the glory of God or my own glory? Have I taken seriously Jesus' teaching that it is being the servant of all that should be our ambition? Mark 10.42-45.

- *Sinful attitudes*

There is conflict and murder from Cain because he resents God's blessing upon Abel, Genesis 4.6. There is enmity between Sarai and Hagar because one has a child and one does not, Genesis 16.4,5. There is conflict between Saul and David because of Saul's jealousy of his rival's prowess, 1 Samuel 18.8,9.

Conflict arises in Israel and the kingdom is split because of Rehoboam's youthful arrogance and insensitivity to people, 1 Kings 12. Many conflicts are caused by the sinful desires that battle within us – the inner battle bursts out to become a battle

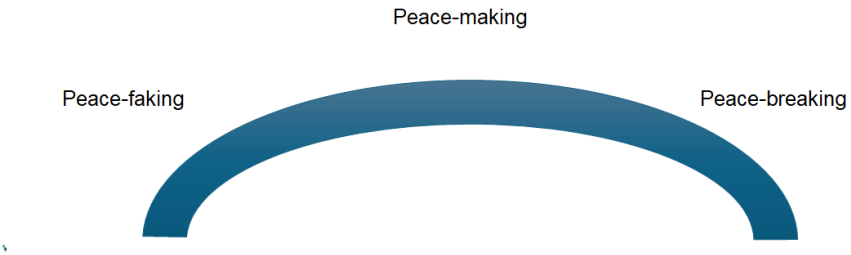
with others. 'What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions,' James 4.1 - 3. And often those desires (or passions) betray a conceit and lack of contentedness, a lack of faith in God, a lack of trusting the Lord for our situation expressed in humble, believing prayer.

So, when personal conflict appears on the horizon look at these four things and to use them to analyse the situation and ask, 'what's actually going on here with me?' or more widely 'what is really driving all this division among us?'

Reactions to Conflict

In his book, Ken Sande gives us a very helpful visual representation of the various ways people tend to react to personal conflict. Some of us will want to escape from it – our response is to deny there is a problem. We may avoid the person in question. Some of us will want to attack the offending individual in some way – to have a grand bust up which justifies us and proves we were in the right all along. But the Biblical Christian response is to want to sort things out and make peace with our brother or sister.

I can't reproduce his visual exactly, but he calls it 'the slippery slope' and it looks a bit like this:



The peace-faking is the escape side – we deny there is any trouble. But we keep grudges in our hearts. The problem is never talked through. Talking might make things worse. It might be too painful. Best to try to overlook it. And there is a proper place for overlooking things and thinking well of people as we shall see. But often

what happens is that although we tell ourselves we are overlooking the problem – we are still carrying the hurt and the grudge in our hearts – and we are on the slippery slope to a bad relationship with that person. This is the usual response among nice middle-class evangelicals. We would rather end a friendship than face anything painful or rock the boat. We like to think that being straight will only make things worse. We hope that 'time will heal' – but it rarely does. It simply postpones or shelves a proper solution.

The peace-breaking option – is the attack / destroy the person option. This is the opposite peace-faking (see diagram). We are more interested in winning an argument than winning a person. We are more concerned for self-justification than keeping the unity of the Spirit, Ephesians 4.3. And of course, this reaction is now much used by the social media trolls and others in our politically correct society. If you can't win the argument destroy the person – or at least their credibility. But that is not the Christ-like way. Again, you are sliding down the slippery slope into severed relationships – but this time from the opposite side.

The peace-making response is that which the Lord Jesus wants to see in us. This is the right option. Jesus came as the great peacemaker between God and man, Romans 5.1 – and we, as his followers, are meant to be of the same spirit and outlook. This is level ground (at the top of the diagram) where we can stand and make progress.

But sometimes it is not easy to get to that place of level ground. It is particularly difficult to get to there, if you have suffered not simply hurt but injustice. Hurt is often to do with our pride – it's not a bad thing to have it dented. But injustice is something much deeper. We feel (rightly) it is simply not fair that someone should do this to us. We have been truly wronged.

Here, we must take ourselves in hand. We need to think through what has happened to us and its consequences. We should tell ourselves the following: If that person who has sinned against us is a Christian, then Christ has paid for this sin and we must leave it with him. Do we honestly want to say to Christ 'I want more?' (No, we don't) If the person is a non-Christian they will pay for their sin including what they did to you on the final day – leave it with God – he is the judge not you, Romans 12.19. And also remember that to be, in your heart, a continual accuser is to be like Satan the accuser, Job 1.9f. But to have a spirit to forgive is to be like God, Ephesians 4.32. So, take the spiritual opportunity, this unjust suffering is a chance not only to please God but to grow like him. That might help you get to the level ground where peace-making can begin.

Remedies to conflict

First, we need to realize that when it comes to dealing with personal issues, we all have a duty as Christians to be to be peacemakers.

Consider these texts concerning peace:

- Matthew 5.9, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.'
- Romans 12.18, 'If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceable with all.'
- Hebrews 12.14, 'Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.'
- Ephesians 4.3, '(Be) eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope.'
- Mark 9.50, 'Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'
- 1 Thessalonians5.13, 'Be at peace among yourselves.'

Or consider the Biblical emphasis on brotherly love: The new commandment is that we love one another as Christ has loved us, John 13.34, 35. He loved us while we were still against him. And if our brother sins against us the answer is Ephesians 4.32: 'Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ, forgave you.'

Many people long for a holy church. That, of course, is right. However, there is a definite relationship between an absence of love in the church and sin (unholiness) in Christians. Love in the church ought to be a chief source of pleasure and joy for the Christian. But where that is missing (or actually is treated negatively and with disdain) it makes it easier for people to look for joy unhelpfully, elsewhere. They secretly indulge in the brief pleasures of sin, excusing themselves by the fact that the acrid atmosphere of their church provides no genuine pleasure – so they might as well sin. There are churches that are so concerned for the truth that they have lost their first love, Revelation 2.1-7. All they can do is criticize others and it brings the displeasure of the Lord and leads others into sin.

What then, can we do? What are the remedies to try in resolving personal conflict? Here are six that we find in the NT. The first three could be called 'private peace-making' and the second three 'assisted peace-making.'

First, we should take the private path.

- *Overlook the offence*

Many disputes need to be put in perspective. Actually, they are so insignificant that you are demeaning yourself by not letting go of them. 'Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offence,' Proverbs 19.11. Does it really matter that the older lady pushed in front of you in the queue for coffee after the morning service? Is it worth making it into a big deal? Overlooking an offence is a form of forgiveness and involves a deliberate decision not to talk about it or dwell on it. Thinking on God's forgiveness of us will help.

- *Reconciliation*

If an offence is too serious to overlook, we need to go personally and privately and try to humbly sort things out. 'If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift,' Matthew 5.23-24. Notice, as we have mentioned before, the way forward is a face-to-face meeting[4]. If we have sinned ourselves then the attitude of the prodigal son on his return to his father is our example to follow – confession of wrongdoing, with no excuses. If we are offering forgiveness the example to pursue is that of the father of the prodigal son – joy and delight in a relationship restored, Luke 15 – not that of the older brother. 'As the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also must forgive,' Colossians 3.13. It is no good doing this grudgingly or with a 'I suppose I must' spirit. We must do so fully and freely!

- *Negotiation*

If there has been some damage – such as financial or material – involved in the breakdown of relationship – then there might be at least a place to raise the matter of compensation – and in a brotherly way negotiate a settlement. If a brother or sister leant you their car and you scratched it or worse still had an accident and wrecked it, then I think they are due more than simply saying 'sorry' (however sincere) and simply walking away. We need to sit down and talk with them. We need to agree together on a suitable recompense.

[4] Again, we see this is no place for texts or emails. Reconciliation can only be brought about person to person.

Second, there is assisted peace-making

- *Mediation*

If two people cannot reach agreement together in private, they should ask for a more objective person or persons (outside the situation and acceptable to both parties) to try to help them, 'But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses,' Matthew 18.16. These witnesses or mediators are there to ask questions and give advice, but they have no authority to *force* a solution. That needs to come about before the Lord by mutual agreement.

- *Arbitration*

If you still cannot come to agreement, then the way forward seems to be for both parties to be willing to submit to arbitrators to listen to your arguments and render a binding decision. In the case of the problems in Corinth – instead of going to unbelieving lawyers – Paul encourages the disputants to submit to trusted people within the church. He rules out secular law courts. 'So, if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud – even your own brothers!' 1 Corinthians 6.4. Notice that what Paul says here carries with it a concern for the reputation of the church and therefore the reputation of Christ himself.

- *Accountability*

What if there is still no agreement? Hopefully, it doesn't have to come to this. But with no resolution the problem is to be brought to the church – to a special church meeting presumably. This is where the NT finally takes us if there is no settlement. The Christian people of the church become the final court of appeal, Matthew 18.17. This is often regarded negatively, but if it is pursued in the loving atmosphere, which ought to characterise a church, with a desire to restore (which, of course, is what the Lord Jesus wants, Matthew 5.9), then it can work out well. All the facts must be open to all. Recently there has been a trend towards keeping things very private, and keeping church members in the dark, when there has been serious trouble in a church. But this is not found in the NT. Rather in the NT the emphasis is much more on the need for transparency.

The key to all this is a genuine love among Christians and in the churches – which sadly is often missing. That is where we so often continue to fall down. How important it is to nurture love in the churches!

Two problems at once?

We have considered two kinds of conflict; conflict over essential issues and conflict over personal issues. But of course, very often these things are not separable in any watertight way. Often there are two problems at once. Doctrinal issues easily slide over into personal malice. We should really guard against this. So, in all this – much prayer is required by everyone.

Iain Murray writes this: 'When disputes and differences arise, they are not likely to be solved only by argument. Supernatural aid is needed. Thomas Manton wrote: "In our contests…God must especially be sought for blessing…disputing times should also be praying times. Prejudices will never vanish until God 'send out his light and truth', Psalm 43.3; and if the devil is not prayed down, as well as disputed down, little good cometh of our contests."[5]

[5] *Evangelical Holiness,* by Iain Murray, Banner of Truth, page 117.