

HARMONY IN THE CHURCH

Students of the Word of God understand that the Old Testament has a very important role in helping us understand how God works and what kind of people He wants his children to be. They also understand that there are many parallels between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God today. The Lord wants us to learn from the mistakes of past ages and to thereby become better people.

As one traces the history of the Israelites he is struck by how often they ignored God's goodness to them and not only disobeyed God repeatedly, but even left him to serve gods of the pagan nations around them.

The book of Exodus records the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage under the leadership of Moses. Great miracles, including ten plagues, demonstrated God's power and ability to lead them to safety. They were promised a new home in a land "flowing with milk and honey". One would think that the people would be overjoyed and would gladly be trusting and obedient to whatever God directed them to do.

We all know how that turned out. Of all the multitude that left Egypt, only two adults made it to the promised land; the rest died there in the wilderness.

What went wrong? We see the beginnings in Exodus 16:2-3. We are told that "The whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron..." They wished they were back in Egypt and accused Moses and Aaron of bringing them into the desert to starve! In chapter 17, verse 2, we find the people complaining to Moses again. God always provided what was needed, but the people continued to be complainers and to show no respect for God or his leaders.

Is there an application in this for those who are God's people today? In Philippians 2:14 we find these words, "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation". We need to understand that there is such a thing as "progression of sin". That means that something that does not seem to be so bad at the time can lead to other things that become worse and worse. The grumbling and complaining of the Israelites helped to develop attitudes of resentment, anger, and eventually outright rebellion against God.

On the church website one can find an article entitled "The Evils of Dissension". Some are already familiar with it. It points out the very grave consequences of stirring up discord and dissension within a church...and how much God opposes this kind of thing.

The question arises as to how the seeds of dissension are sown. It is unlikely that a person just says to himself, "I think I will see how much dissension I can cause in the church". No. In nearly all cases, dissension can be traced to attitudes of selfishness, pride, and, most importantly, a lack of devotion to the teachings of the Lord. These were the attitudes that led to the complaining of the Israelites...and they are the attitudes that lead to complaining and dissension in the church

today. And be sure of this: DISSENSION IS ALWAYS PRECEDED BY COMPLAINING AND CRITICAL ATTITUDES!

There are some important things which we should understand about the church. From Ephesians 3 we learn that the church was part of God's eternal plan. It was to consist of his own special people...people who made the conscious decision to give themselves to the Lord, sacrificing their personal desires to the desires of God, always confident that the Lord has wonderful blessings in store for his people. He has left us careful instructions as to how we are to live in love, peace, and harmony. And that is exactly what results when we pay attention to his instructions!

Do you suppose that the Lord knew that there would be problems among his people? Did he expect us all to be perfect? Of course not! And that is why he left multiple instructions for how to deal with a variety of problems which were sure to arise. When we follow those instructions, things inevitably go smoothly for the church.

What are some common sources of church problems? People complain about a variety of problems, ranging from the petty to the serious. If a person is a member of the church long enough he is certain to encounter some problem people. Someone will be discourteous or unkind, perhaps even insulting or hurtful. Sometimes offenses are deliberate and sometimes they are accidental or inadvertent. Some people can be quite insensitive. No two people are exactly alike in their maturing process as a Christian. The offending person might even be a church leader.

The question is not whether or not, sooner or later, a Christian will be wronged by another member of the church. It *will* happen. The question is how the one offended responds.

Christianity requires people to react in ways which go against the grain of our human nature. Our natural instinct is to lash back at those who offend us. Some kind of rebuke or punishment should be given to those who do us wrong---at least we tend to feel that way.

But what do the scriptures teach? In Matthew 18:21 we find Peter asking Jesus this question, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Peter probably thought he could forgive a few times. But surely there must be a point when forgiving time was over!) Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times". In other words, always continue to forgive.

In Romans 12:17 we find these words, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil". A little further down he says, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath". Paul quotes the Lord who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay..."

There are various ways in which one may respond to a person who sins against him. He may choose to ignore the sin, forgive him, and go on with his life. Sometimes there is a need to confront the person about his sin, lovingly trying to get him to see his fault. As explained in Matthew 18:15-17, if the offender does not repent in such cases, the offended person is to take one or two others with him to talk to the sinner. If the person still does not listen, the matter is to be brought before the entire church. If the person still does not repent, he is to be treated as a

pagan; in other words, he is to be excluded from the church fellowship. (This action is sometimes referred to as “disfellowshipping”).

Following either of these courses of action is acceptable to the Lord. BUT there is another course of action which is NOT acceptable. It is wrong for one to go around and stir up dissension in the church by spreading malicious gossip or criticism among other members. This kind of activity is really a way of getting back at the offender by turning others against him. As such talk is spread it inevitably becomes twisted or exaggerated. People become upset, suspicious, resentful, and develop attitudes which violate the true spirit of Christianity.

The Bible refers to the church as a family---the family of God. There are many comparisons between the church and human families. Parents very much want peace and harmony to prevail within their families. They are highly pleased when they see their children treat each other with love and consideration. But, as all parents learn, there are times when conflicts develop among siblings. Sometimes disputes become so heated that parents have to step in and restore order. Parents learn that unless order is enforced things will go from bad to worse. Not only is there disorder in the family, but the children who are not constrained to act properly are likely to become worse and worse, eventually becoming dysfunctional adults.

God is, of course, our heavenly father, but he does not come down personally and address individual problems in the church...although He does pay close attention and does care very much about the welfare of his children. God’s plan is for godly leaders to address the needs of the church. Speaking to the elders of the church in Ephesus, Paul said the following, as recorded in Acts 20:28, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” Peter gave similar instructions in I Peter, chapter 5.

These words are found in Hebrews 13:17: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you”. Does this mean that leaders are infallible, never making a mistake? Are their judgments always exactly right? NO. If the leaders ask members to do something which violates God’s laws, are members to do that? Of course not! Most of the work of leadership involves matters of judgment. Sometimes their judgment is not the same as the judgment of some of the members. Do I personally always agree with the judgment of church leaders? No, but I understand that God expects me to be a team player---a family member---and cooperate to the best of my ability. Surely we should all feel that way.

Parents have various ways in which they can deal with their children who cause disruption in their family. Church leaders also have the responsibility to deal with disruptive forces in the church family, such as the situation previously mentioned in Matthew 18. Different situations call for different responses. Titus 3:10 provides instructions for how to handle a person who persists in being divisive in the church. If after a second warning the person does not repent, he is to be excluded from church fellowship. As the verse says, “...have nothing to do with him”.

Certainly such an action is unpleasant and very saddening, indeed very painful. But God said to do it! Failure to do so hurts both the church and the offending person.

It is very instructive to consider a situation in the church in Corinth. Chapter 5 records that one of the members was living with his father's wife. The church was doing nothing about it. Paul insisted that the church "...hand this man over to Satan so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord". Paul did not use the word "disfellowship", but he was saying that this person must be removed from their fellowship in the hopes that he would come to his senses and repent. In the same letter, Paul scolded the church for the divisions which they had allowed to prevail in their midst.

Later when Paul wrote the second letter to the Corinthians, he mentioned both situations. In chapter 2 we learn that the man who was disciplined did indeed repent. Paul told the Corinthians that they should now forgive, comfort, and love him. In chapter 7 Paul highly commended the Corinthians for how they had responded to his other condemnations of their behavior. His words are very important for our consideration as they provide a wonderful model for what true repentance is. Note these words (vs. 10-11):

"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done". These clear signs of repentance are what God wants to see, not a grudging half-hearted apology.

It should be pointed out that it was the responsibility of all the members to honor Paul's instruction to isolate the offending brother. If some of the members had refused to sever fellowship, the man might never have come to repentance. If a member fails to obey instructions like that given in Titus 3, he is not only disobeying God, but he harms the person in sin by condoning the wrong which has been done, thereby discouraging repentance.

I am well acquainted with the leadership of this church. I know they devote countless hours of selfless service, always doing the best they can to help the congregation to be the best it can be. They are always ready to listen to those who have problems or questions about what goes on here. Members are urged to talk to one or more of these leaders if they have a problem. You can be assured that the matter will be addressed.

Serious problems arise when a disgruntled member, rather than go to a leader who can help resolve things, goes to another member and starts grumbling and criticizing. That brings up another point: dissension spreads only when there are sympathetic listeners. If everyone who hears such grumbling would insist on going to the proper persons who can correct things, the results would be quite different. Nothing stops a complainer or critic like having someone refuse to listen.

In summary, remember this: when one has the spirit of Christ, he will do all he can to promote love and harmony. He will forgive wrongs done to him without trying to get revenge of any kind; he will let God take care of that. He will do his best to encourage and uplift all of his brothers and sisters, doing nothing to discourage anyone or to undermine the authority of a leader. He will understand that no one is perfect and will be patient with the mistakes of others---just as God is patient with him. He will be intent upon keeping peace in his church family just as he is with his

own family. Christ loves his church...and we should love it too...and defend it to the best of our abilities.