

# RCF

## Covenant Classes

### Session 3

## The Covenant Community

### I. Introduction

- A. It has already been established, in previous covenant classes, that God wants to bring the reality of His Kingdom to the earth through the church. The primary instrument for the bringing of the Kingdom in love and power is the local church. However, the local church is made up of people that often don't get along. So how can the local church become a community of believers that can be the powerful expression of the Kingdom on earth?
- B. God has in mind the building of a community in the local church. This is a special **voluntary association of believers** that work for the benefit of those involved and act as a **revelation of God's Kingdom principles and realities** to the lost world. A 2006 study published in the Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine reveals that regular church attendance increases the life span of people between 1.8 to 3.1 years. Numerous other studies have been conducted that have revealed the physical benefits of participating in a faith community. These studies are supportive of the mandate in the Scripture for the church to become a "body of believers" that develops into a community of love and support.
- C. The problem is that local churches in general are not healthy communities of faith. There is much strife and division in the average church. Senior pastors stay in a church on the average of about 3.5 years. Youth pastors stay less than one year. These statistics reveal a grave crisis in leadership and authority in the local church. Churches divide over personal preferences such as music styles, non-essential doctrines or personality conflicts among leading figures in the church. Because of this condition, the average church is not a strong, life-giving community that can support a healthy and committed group of believers.
- D. There is a biblical model for the development of a community of faith. If a church will allow itself to be molded by that biblical model, a life-giving community of faith can be developed. That faith community can be an agent of Jesus to transform the people in the faith community so they gain the understanding and practice of biblical community life. The faith community can be a dramatic instrument of change for the lost world.,too.

## II. The Three Models of Church Community

Over the centuries of the existence of the church, there have been various models of church community that have developed. There are three dominant models that can be seen functioning today. An examination of these models and a comparison with the model in the Scripture will help to clarify what direction the church needs to take today.

### A. Consumerism

This model has especially become popular in the wealthy nations and communities, but it has also taken root in many places that are not wealthy. Consumerism is sometimes known as the “consumer model,” “program oriented,” “negotiated services,” and in more contemporary vernacular and practice it is often referred to as, “seeker sensitive.” Some people call this model, “church light.”

#### 1. Members

- a. The members of this church community expect the church to provide services for them. Some of the services are traditional such as weddings, funerals, baby dedications, and baptisms. Some of the services are more modern such as child care, entertainment for youth—and sometimes adults—counseling services, programs for various interest groups, and some biblical instruction.
- b. Discipleship is a function of the programs being offered. To be discipled is to become involved in a program or class. There is not necessarily an expectation that discipleship will lead to a greater commitment to service or a changed life. It is more likely to be an intellectual engagement in order to gain knowledge.
- c. There is a line of distinction between the professional clergy and the laity. The clergy are paid and expected to perform certain duties for the laity. The laity is the consumer of the services offered by the clergy.
- d. The commitment by members of the consumer model is based on the perceived value of services being offered. If the services “meet the needs” of the people, then the church has done a good job and is worthy of the membership of the participant.
- e. The members agree to responsibilities such as giving some of their money in the form of tithes and offerings. The members agree to attend on a regular or somewhat regular basis, and there is some expectation of volunteerism.

#### 2. The church

- a. The consumer church attempts to have a paid clergy that will provide the services for the members. There is not much expectation that the clergy will train people and

release them into effective service for the Lord. The focus is more on motivating people and getting them to take “ownership.”

- b. The church tries to provide a bundle of services that is more attractive to the members and potential members than other churches. The potential members will check out the bundle of services and look for the best deal for their membership.
- c. Church leaders focus on maintaining and growing a viable membership that will buy the bundle of services being offered.
- d. The primary goal is to meet the demands of the membership base, not to advance the Kingdom and become active citizens of the Kingdom here on earth. It is very important not to offend members or potential members or the consumer base will be reduced.
- e. Leaders are evaluated based on how well they have provided services to the members. There is little concern about their call by God and how that can be carried out.
- f. The main purpose of the consumer church is to meet the perceived needs of people and provide a comforting and motivating environment.
- g. The consumer model church wants to become the “Wal-Mart” of the religious community. This happens by doing the best job of giving the services demanded and then realizing the profitability of satisfied people.

### **3. The fruits**

- a. The consumer model church tends to feed people’s self-centeredness. People want God to serve them, not them to serve God. They want to compartmentalize their “religious life” and be comfortable in it. This church model works for people that want something that will satisfy them but not cost them too much personally.
- b. The consumer church is useful for the consumer (church attender) but is limited in its ability to be effective for the Kingdom. The selfishness of people is encouraged so they are unlikely to sacrifice much for the work of Christ. They are willing to pay their tithe so someone else can do the work of the Kingdom.
- c. This model of church community removes much of the personal responsibility from people in the church community. The responsibility for “doing” falls on the paid staff and the “church.” Individuals are not challenged in personal holiness or service and sacrifice to the Lord.
- d. Consumer churches do tend to look for current trends in people’s preferences and adjust to those trends. This helps

these churches draw in lost people as well as transfer believers from other churches.

## **B. Communism**

Communism in the church community is not the same as Marxist communism. The concept of communism is that people in the church community have all things in common. These churches tend to focus on the passages in Scripture that refer to how people gave sacrificially for the **common good**. The main passage is Acts 4:32-35. Church communism is practiced or has been practiced in some of the Anabaptist groups such as the Hutterites, Quakers, Shakers, the Amana Colonies and the Moravians. Church communism is also seen in contemporary models of “shepherding” churches or “controlling” churches.

### **1. Members**

- a. Members of communism church communities are expected to give all they have for the church community. This may mean literally to turn over the ownership to the church or it may mean allowing the church to dictate what happens to personal wealth.
- b. People achieve high degrees of spirituality by not being materialistic in this model. Anyone who wants to get more material goods is “worldly.”
- c. The community becomes responsible to God and the people responsible to the community. In that sense, the community takes on the responsibility that should belong to the individual believer.
- d. In some of these communities even the raising of children is seen as a community act because the raising of children can only be accomplished rightly within the community (“it take a village”).
- e. This type of church community is especially attractive to people that are tired of materialism, hedonism and narcissism.
- f. Members are expected to be very participatory to the point of having very little private life. Private family life and private ownership are subject to the dictates of the church community.

### **2. The Church**

- a. The church as the community becomes the greater good or the “common good.” People are encouraged to work toward and sacrifice for the “common good” of the church community. This is very similar to socialism that elevates the state to becoming the central command for the common good.
- b. People need to make their resources available to the church. If they refuse, the church demands the resources.

- c. The church community has responsibility for the administration of the common resources. Individuals need not make decisions about their personal resources or those of the community.
- d. Delegated or elected leaders take responsibility for the material wealth of the community and determine the spiritual direction of the community.
- e. The expected effect on the lost world is that the people of the world will observe the great benefits of the community and will want to join. This is the primary focus of evangelism.
- f. Legalism (the creation of laws and rules not prescribed by the Bible) becomes the strong bond that holds together this type of church community. Legalism is a necessary mechanism to control the sin nature of man.

### **3. The fruits**

- a. People tend to make strong commitments to these types of church communities but become disillusioned over time because it is not the utopia that was expected.
- b. There is an appearance of giving all to the Lord but people are not challenged to deal with their heart issues of greed and selfishness. Instead, they rely upon the rules of the community to control their sinful desires.
- c. There is little personal responsibility because the church community controls most resources.
- d. There is often a genuine concern for other people within the community and an active effort to meet the needs of people.

## **C. Covenantalism**

The covenantal model sees the church as the covenantal representative of God on earth for the purposes the Lord has chosen. A covenantal community focuses primarily on being responsible to carry out the work of the Kingdom based upon the redemption of Christ that created the covenantal community. The covenantal concept is that the church community is a voluntary associate of believers that are in the process of having their lives transformed by the Lord and learning how to function together with the proper balance of inward growth and outward expression.

### **1. Members**

- a. People enter into a saving covenant with Jesus. Jesus grants people eternal life and people voluntarily give their lives to the Lord for His purposes on earth.
- b. An important part of the believer availing his life to the Lord is recognizing the need to become part of a

community of faith that is growing inwardly and reaching out to the lost world.

- c. Members are expected to engage in covenantal relationships, based on biblical principles, with other covenant community members in order to more effectively serve the Lord together.
- d. Members seek interdependence of the covenantal community with mutual love and concern. The consumer Christian is seen as being in need of understanding that we are here to serve Jesus through the church not to be served by the church.
- e. The stronger members are expected to serve the weaker members of the covenantal community not because it is required by law but because it is the model Jesus set before us.
- f. The members of the covenantal community are expected to have private ownership and stewardship but also to freely make resources available to the Lord as he directs the individuals.
- g. There is a focus on the giving of life and love to each other as that life and love is received by the Lord individually and together as a church body.
- h. There is a high degree of personal ownership and personal accountability. People must work through heart issues of greed and selfishness if they are going to participate effectively in the covenant community.
- i. The community seeks to be a place of encouragement and support for all but also recognizes there will be differing gifts and that the Lord determines the distribution of assets.
- j. Full participation in the church community is the focus more than attendance or giving of money.

## **2. The church**

- a. The church is one sphere of God's corporate covenantal representation on the earth. The church has the mandate and responsibility to develop a community of faith that will be a powerful influence on those in the community toward holiness and righteousness.
- b. Each covenantal member is seen as a voluntary participant with the mandate from God to join together with others for the greater purpose of the Kingdom.
- c. The church is required to implement discipline among the members of the covenantal community for the benefit of the community and so that the name of Jesus will not be profaned.
- d. The church community expects an individual response of believers to a corporate purpose of the Lord. The church

does not demand the individual believer to carry out their role faithfully but it does hold up that standard and carry that expectation.

- e. As people join in covenantal relationships and purpose—God is more able to release His love and power in increasing measure in and through the church community.
- f. Resources are not for the common good—they are for the Kingdom good.

### 3. The fruits

- a. People make voluntary choices in regard to participation in the covenant community. Some will choose to commit in a deep way while others will choose to have reserved commitments.
- b. Personal responsibility is the burden of the individual but the church community does uphold the biblical standard for community life.
- c. The church can become the holy instrument of God on the earth to defeat the realm of evil and advance the purposes of Christ.

## III. Definitions

### A. Covenant

1. A covenant is a [**solemn bond, sovereignly administered, with attendant blessings and cursings**].
  - a. The solemn bond is that by faith in Christ we are redeemed from our lost condition and become part of the family of God. This is the covenant of grace made between Jesus and His people.
  - b. Those who are saved agree to avail their lives to Christ who becomes the ruler of their lives.
  - c. The covenant is sovereignly administered by the Lord. That means that God sets the parameters of the covenant and operates within those parameters. He also expects His people to operate according to covenant principles.
  - d. The covenant carries with it blessings and cursings. Those who are covenantal violators will be disciplined by the Lord. This is revealed in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 that speaks of taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner and drinking judgment onto one's self. Blessings are also given by the Lord to those who love Him and live according to His covenantal ways.
2. The covenant of grace is the basic covenant the Lord made with fallen man. The covenant is made with an individual and Christ as the person chooses to put faith in Jesus for salvation. That

covenant is then extended to a commitment to the faith community which Jesus has established to be His corporate representative on earth.

3. It is within the context of the covenantal community that the covenant of grace is primarily administered in blessings and curses as well as purpose and relationship.

## **B. Community**

1. Community is a voluntary association of people who have joined together for a greater purpose and greater relationship than could be accomplished individually or in association with a small group. A community can be identified as a specific group of people that have a specific commitment and purpose.
2. Christ gave himself for the church (corporate) (Ephesians 5:25). It was always in the heart of Christ to redeem individual people so they could become part of the covenantal community on earth.
3. Jesus holds the covenantal community together by His presence and His principles (Colossians 2:19).
4. The purpose of the covenantal community is to rightly administer the covenant Jesus made with His church (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Colossians 1:8).
5. The biblical model throughout history has been that of a covenantal community. Noah and his sons and their wives were a covenantal community in a “sea” of unrighteousness (Genesis 6:18, 9:1). Abraham and his descendants through Israel became the covenantal community to reveal God’s righteousness to the lost world (Genesis 12:1-3; 4:5; 17:3-8). Jesus lived out His ministry within a covenant community of the twelve disciples. The mandate for the covenant community now has been passed to the church in order to reveal God’s plan of redemption and provide a community of wisdom, love and power for the saints (Matthew 16:18; 28:18-20).

## **IV. How to Make It Work**

- A. No covenant community will survive without biblical structure and principles as governing agents. The sinful nature of man will always tend toward self-interest which is a destructive force in a community of faith. Jesus often instructed the disciples regarding the principles of the covenant community. He told them that as leaders they could not lord it over people. He spoke about how to resolve conflict between people. He reminded them of the purpose for which they had joined together. In order for a covenant community to thrive, it must adopt biblical principles of conflict resolution and community discipline.

## B. **The goals of conflict resolution and community discipline**

### **1. Righteousness:**

The first goal of conflict resolution is righteousness (Hebrews 12:11). Righteousness is being in right relationships. The Bible challenges us to be in right relationship with God and man. There are really two different expressions of righteousness that can be talked about from a biblical perspective.

**Positional righteousness** is what we have in Christ when we become Christians. At the point of regeneration, the Spirit of God comes and grants the new believer forgiveness of the many and grievous transgressions against the Lord. In Christ, we are positionally righteous in God's sight from that point forward. This is not because of our good actions, rather, it is because of the act of faith in trusting Jesus as our righteousness. Positional righteousness does not change each time we transgress. We remain positionally righteous before God as long as we are in Christ. On the day we face the Lord for judgment, He will declare us righteous because Jesus is righteous and we have put faith in Him for our righteousness.

**Conditional righteousness** is the ongoing way that we live our lives out. Even though Christ has given us positional righteousness, each time we violate God's will we have damaged the present relationship we have with Him. In this sense, we are not right with the Lord. We can easily recognize this unrighteousness when we have committed an offense against the Lord and then we try to pray. The only thing that comes to our mind is the need to make right what we have done wrong. Usually we will have to confess our sin and repent before we have a sense of being restored to the Lord and able to have unhindered relationship with Him again.

Conditional righteousness with people has to do with the reflection of the righteousness we have with the Lord. We cannot be right with God and at the same time have unrighteous attitudes and actions toward people. The conditional righteousness with the Lord affects our righteousness with men. If there is unresolved conflict in our lives with people we will suffer from the unrighteous relationship we have with those people and we will suffer in relational righteousness with the Lord.

Righteousness is the first and most fundamental goal of conflict resolution. Sometimes righteousness demands that we do not compromise and settle a matter with someone but, more often, righteousness demands that we pursue a Godly end to conflict so that the Lord can be glorified in our lives and our relationships with other people. Righteousness is a worthy goal of conflict resolution.

## 2. Peace:

The second goal of conflict resolution is peace (Romans 14:1). The Bible calls us to be at peace with God and man. Jesus is identified as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Conflict by nature tends to take peace and replace it with strife. Sometimes conflict is the only way to come to an eventual place of peace but peace must still be the goal. There are two expressions of peace that are impacted by conflict.

**External peace** is what we have when we are not in conflict with people or God. One way to describe external peace is that it is a lack of strife with others. When someone is in conflict with another person, there are attempts made to avoid the person or a situation where there could be another conflict. External peace removes the need to avoid because the conflict has been resolved. External peace gives us freedom to be able to come into contact with anyone without being stirred up and stressed out because “he” or “she” will be there.

**Internal peace** is, perhaps, much more substantial and much more important. This is the peace we have in our inner being when we are not internally in conflict. External conflict may lead to internal conflict but internal conflict nearly always leads to external conflict. If, however, we have an internal peace no matter the circumstances we face, we will remain at peace. Internal peace comes first from knowing we are at peace with the Lord, that there is nothing hindering our relationship. Then, internal peace comes when we are at peace with other people. Sometimes people refuse to be at peace with us, but we can still be at peace in our hearts toward them or the situation that has stirred up the conflict.

Anyone who is out of peace knows the profound effects. People are afflicted with sicknesses, they succumb to unreasonable fears, and are concerned about when the next conflict will take place. Unresolved conflict produces a lack of external peace and internal peace. A valuable goal of conflict resolution is to find both internal and external peace.

## 3. Unity:

The third goal of conflict resolution is unity. This is the goal that the Lord sets for the Body of Christ, his Church (Ephesians 4:1-13). The Lord desires for the church to be able to be in perfect unity with him and with the other members of His Body. First the foundations of righteousness and peace must come into place and then the Lord can lead us toward a place of unity. In unity we are of one mind and one heart before the Lord

(Romans 15:5-6). Because of the unity we have, God can bless us and release Himself to work through us in increasingly greater measures.

Unrighteous conflict is an assault against unity. When unrighteous conflict is permitted to take its course, it will destroy the ability to have unity. How many churches and pastors can attest to the fact that unrighteous conflict has produces just the opposite of unity? Division that is based in personal unrighteousness is the standard mode of the church. Families have rebellion and wayward children because of unrighteous conflict. Unity cannot be achieved when there is unresolved unrighteous conflict.

Unity is a goal for those who are children of God. Unity cannot be a goal for the believer and the unbeliever to enjoy together. There is no basis for unity with the unbeliever and the believer (2 Corinthians 6:14-15). The most we can expect from the unbelieving world is a measure of righteousness and peace. The goal of unity is reserved for those who are the followers of Jesus. This is a goal that all believers should have and that we should see as the natural result when conflict is processed and resolved in a biblical fashion.

## **C. When Not to Resolve Conflict**

### **1. Wrestling against Evil**

There will never be a time that a true believer is able to resolve the conflict between his service to the Lord and the malevolent intentions of the forces of evil. We wrestle against evil in high places (Ephesians 6:12). The struggle against evil must go on. We cannot end this conflict because only Jesus can do that and only at His appointed time. There is war between the citizens of heaven and the kingdom of evil. Never seek peace or a truce between the two.

Sometimes the conflict between the followers of Christ and the powers of evil becomes a heavy burden. It is easy to want to give in and stop resisting the ways of evil that so many other people are embracing. Sometimes people feel like they are running out of the power to resist evil. The only reason believers are in the condition that they want to give in to evil is because they are not in a right place with the Lord. When Jesus is our all-in-all, He strengthens us and renews us daily so that the struggle with evil is not too great. This is a struggle we should and must take on and continue to win. The gates of hell will not prevail...(Matthew 16:18).

## **2. Struggling Against The Sin Nature**

The nature of sin within every person continues to try to exert its power and influence even after we have come to Christ. The sin nature will try to hold onto some of our thinking and our actions until we die. It is incumbent upon us to continue to subdue the nature of sin within us. This driving force is a conflict that every believer has and was described by Paul, the apostle, when he said, “The very thing I desire to do, I do not do and that which I do not want to do I do” (Romans 7:18-20). The sin nature is a conflict within that only living by the power of the Holy Spirit will solve for us.

## **3. People That Demand Compromise of the Truth**

There are those who have been enlisted in the work of evil. Sometimes these workers of iniquity are aware that they are servants of evil while at other times they think themselves to be of noble character. They try to force a homogenized truth on everyone by requiring compromise of the Truth for those who follow Christ. There is never a time when Truth can be compromised in order to resolve conflict. Think of the person who feels that Christianity is very exclusive because it proclaims that faith in Jesus is the only means of redemption. The compromise position wants the believer to accept all beliefs as equal. These philosophers of this age will say that “there are many ways to God” and to hold up Jesus as the only way is narrow minded and destructive. According to these folks, we should never tell anyone they are going to hell since our way is not their way and our way is not any better than their way.

Jesus said that he came to bring division (Luke 12:51). This must be understood to mean that those who follow Christ and adhere to the truth will be divided from those who do not. This division is because of a conflict of belief as opposed to a conflict caused by actions. While the division that takes place between people when someone clings to the truth is not comfortable, it is a conflict we must be willing to face if we are going to remain faithful to the Lord.

## D. The Context of Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution comes in the context of authority. One of the important reasons God has delegated authority to people is because he wants there to be a context for bringing about peace, righteousness, and unity. It is within the context of authority that peace, righteousness, and unity can be found. This is especially true when some parties involved in conflict refuse to seek Godly resolution. In those occasions, authority is called upon to intervene and bring about a righteous conclusion.

Think of the situation where two small children are fighting with each other. Neither child wants to yield to other. Neither child wants to give up his position of having what he wants. In such situations it takes the intervention of a parent to come and establish and enforce conflict resolution. As the children grow older, they will know the expectations of the authorities and they will begin to bring about resolution on their own.

It will not always be necessary for an authority figure to step in to help with the process of conflict resolution but the possibility of such an intervention should be available. As we learn to operate within the biblical spheres of authority, we will bring about the proper context needed so that conflicts can be remedied when the resolution cannot be achieved by the parties directly involved. If the personal attempts at conflict resolution fail, there needs to be an intervention by authority.

*There are five God ordained spheres of authority. Each of these spheres of authority has a mechanism for resolving conflict. We must understand that the three major goals of conflict resolution, righteousness, peace and unity, come within the context of authority.*

It is important for believers to understand these spheres of authority and righteously operate within the authorities in place, so that resolution can come. To operate outside of the spheres of authority or to cross over from one sphere to another is an act of rebellion. God does not honor such efforts.

### 1. The Five Spheres of Authority

**The Individual**-each person is an individual moral agent responsible for his own decisions before God. Every person can choose to do right or wrong and no one is ever required to participate in sin because they are under an authority structure. We will each stand before Jesus on our own and be judged. We cannot claim an exemption from individual authority to do right and resolve wrong because someone else made me do it.

**The Family**-the husband is the head authority in the family. The wife must see the reality of this delegate authority in order to yield when necessary to that authority. The husband and wife together are in authority over the children. The Scripture tells us that children who rebel against their parents will shorten their lives. (Ephesians 5:18-6:4; Colossians 3:18-22)

**The Place of Employment**-this is often referred to in the Scripture as the master-slave relationship. In the context of modern time, this reality is reflected in the relationship between the one who hires the labors of another and the person who provides those labors. The employer is put in a temporary position of authority and is therefore in the position to deal with conflict within the workplace. (Ephesians 6:5-8; I Timothy 6:1; Titus 2:9-10; Colossians 3:22-25)

**The Civil Government** has been endowed by God with authority in the realm of providing peace and security for its citizens. Civil government makes laws, hires law enforcement personnel, organizes the courts and judicial systems and raises up armies; all as means of maintaining peace and order for the populace. The civil government is intended to be a means of conflict resolution as an authority within their realm. (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17)

**The Church**-Jesus is the head of his church. He is the final arbitrator of all conflict but He also delegates authority to those in the church. Elders, church boards, and pastoral staff, are in positions to bring about resolution to conflict when necessary. Jesus raises up individuals within the church to administer his authority and bring order to His Body. (Matthew 16:19; Acts 16:4; Hebrews 13:17, 24; I Thessalonians 5:12; I Peter 5:1-5; I Corinthians 16:15-16)

## ***2. Relational Levels of Authority***

Within the spheres of authority, we must be able to see where we stand in relationship to those in authority. The level of authority we have in a given situation will determine the parameters of our ability to bring resolution to conflict.

There are three relational levels of authority. How we go about conflict resolution is in large part determined by which level of authority we are in and the level of authority of the one who is in conflict with us. These three levels of authority are:

- a. **Under authority**-this is when we are in conflict with those who have authority over us. We do not have the ability to bring discipline or finality to those in authority over us when we are in conflict with them. Sometimes people under authority gather around themselves others to join in their conflict and try to make a power play against those in authority. This is an ungodly means of conflict resolution and will lead to an ungodly end. Those under authority are to appeal to those over them. They are given the requirement of having at least two witnesses if they are bringing a charge against an Elder. The last step for those under authority is to leave the matter in the hands of the Lord or appeal to a higher level of authority, if a higher level of authority exists.
- b. **Peer level**-in this case we do not have authority over the person we are in conflict with and that person does not have authority over us. Peer level means that we have the ability to confront and appeal but not the ability to discipline. If discipline is necessary we must take the matter to those in authority over us. If there is not authority over us then we must leave the matter in the hands of the Lord if it is not resolved.
- c. **Authority over**-these are people in positions of authority over others. The person in authority has the ability to appeal, confront, correct, and discipline. The type of discipline may be different for each realm of authority but only those in authority have the responsibility and the right to discipline those under authority. The responsibility to discipline other people must be walked out in the fear of God lest there be abusive authority with the people suffering and the Lord personally intervening. This was the case when Eli was the Judge over Israel and his sons became wicked and denied the people justice. Both Eli and his sons were disciplined by the Lord because of their unrighteousness in their role of authority over the people of Israel.

### **3. Categories of Offenders**

In addition to considering the sphere of authority and the relational level of authority in conflict resolution, we must also consider the type of offender that we are dealing with. There are three kinds of offenders to whom the Scripture speaks. Each type of offender is dealt with a little differently.

The three types of offenders are:

- a. **The believer**-other Christians are held to the highest standard of responsibility when it comes to conflict resolution. Because of that, they must also be held to the highest forms of discipline. Those who are within the church are to be strictly held to these high standards by those in authority.

The church has the special responsibility to be holy and pure as a testimony to the lost world. If the church is full of unrighteous and wayward believers who are not challenged in regard to their sin, then the church will have nothing to offer the lost world. The highest goal of the church is unity.

- b. **The false believer**-is the second type of offender. These are the people who have infiltrated the church and appear to be believers. They are to be dealt with as if they were believers, being held to the highest standard, even though they really are not believers. False believers have wrong motives for being among the believers and will most often be the source of division and conflict. The best that can be done with false believers is to bring them to a place of repentance and knowing Christ. Unfortunately, because they often act as if they are believers, they will not acknowledge their need for Christ and therefore must be removed from the body of believers. The Scripture speaks of various kinds of false believers; false prophets, false teachers, false christos, wolves, hirelings, tares (weeds), etc. Unity, peace, or righteousness with false believers can never be achieved without them being regenerated by the Holy Spirit. It often requires discernment by the Holy Spirit and the group of leaders in order to discern false believers among us. (John 10:11-13; Romans 16:17-18; 2 Peter 2; Jude).
- c. **Unbelievers**-are those who do not claim to be believers and are therefore not held to the same standard as believers. With unbelievers our highest goal is to bring them to Christ and outside of that we are to try to live in peace with them. Unbelievers are held to the lowest standard when it comes to conflict resolution. We cannot expect an unbeliever to adhere to the same commitment to resolving conflict as we can for the believer.

Now we have the context of authority in which conflict resolution can be processed. In order to do so righteously we must recognize the sphere of authority, the level of authority, and the category of offender. The identification process is usually quite simple once we acclimate ourselves to the application of these standards.

If we deal with conflict outside of authority or use a wrong authority to deal with the conflict there will not be the resolution that the Lord desires. It is often the case that an invalid authority enters into the process and resolution is made more difficult. Think of the situation where some people in a church (church sphere of authority) are angry at the leaders so they take them to court (civil government sphere of authority) to sue. The church and the name of Jesus are disgraced and the likelihood of coming to a place of righteousness, peace, and unity through the court is quite remote. Another example might be of a parent who brings their child to the pastor to have him disciplined. The child may be disciplined but the cost to the family is that the child will not see the parents as the valid authority in the home, rather, the pastor would have crossed the spheres of authority and violated the family. What of a parent who goes to one child to determine the discipline of another child? This would cause bitter resentment from the child being disciplined and would transfer the authority from the parent to the child. This same

practice is done in churches when leaders appeal to the people to carry out discipline that they are cowards about carrying out themselves.

## **E. Twelve Principles of Conflict Resolution**

### **1. Identification of the Biblical Offense**

Matthew 18:15 begins by referring to the brother who has sinned against us. It goes on to tell us to show him his fault. Using the terms “sin” and “fault” indicate that there is an offense that could clearly be identifiable by the Scripture. It is not enough for us to have hurt feelings or think another person has wronged us. We must have an identifiable biblical violation on which the corrective action turns.

A person who is going to another to challenge them in regard to their sin should have already identified the sin in the Scripture and be able to show the offender the specific passage(s). Emotional pleas tend to play off each other with each person feeling justified in the defense of themselves and the guilt of the other. If there is no clear biblical offense, the matter falls into the category of personality conflict or personal preference. A person cannot be challenged for their sin simply because they do not have a personality that is compatible with someone else or a preference that is different than someone else.

In identifying a biblical offense it is important not to try to use the Scripture as a club to beat someone down with their wrong. The Scripture is meant to be a sword that can penetrate in and cut to the heart of the biblical violation. We need to help people to see how this biblical violation has damaged their relationship with God and with other people. We must also encourage them in understanding that the biblical violation is not our preference, rather, it is the immutable standard of the Eternal Creator. The biblical violation must be corrected if there is to be peace in the lives of the parties involved and the lives of those around them.

### **2. Redemptive More than Punitive**

Matthew 18:15 tells us that if the person listens to the biblical appeal, “you have won your brother over.” There must be this redemptive attitude in all attempts at conflict resolution. The primary purpose for the corrective action cannot be our vindication or taking out revenge on someone else. These motives will muddy the waters so that the offender will see the process as a personal attack rather than a godly attempt at peace and unity.

There should be no pleasure in us in regard to punishment of others. If we want to see the other person suffer for what he has done wrong, then we have been poisoned in our heart and cannot carry out the biblical process rightly. Instead we need to see the other person through the eyes of Jesus. Jesus saw the horror of our sin and yet he loved us enough to lower himself to our level and seek redemption. Even though he was the one who was wronged, Jesus was the instrument of reconciliation. We must also have the attitude of being the instrument of reconciliation rather than the instrument of punishment.

Punishment may need to take place but our heart should be sad in the process. We should be longing for the wayward believer to be reconciled to us and completely restored. The only way we can have this attitude is to have a heart of love and redemption as we enter into the process. We cannot wait until the person is broken and repentant before we desire redemption. Even while the offender is arrogant and justifying his sin, we must be willing to see the hope of redemption and reconciliation as we engage the corrective process.

### **3. Involve the Least Number of People Possible**

Looking at Matthew 18:15-20, we can see that the process of reconciliation begins with just two people. Both of those people are directly involved in the conflict. As the process continues, more people are added because the earlier stages of attempting resolution did not work. This helps us to understand that we want to involve the least number of people in the process of conflict resolution that can be involved.

Sometimes an offended party will go to other people to plead their case and strengthen their position. This helps to energize the offended party and makes the likelihood of a redemptive attitude much less. There is also the problem that when resolution and reconciliation do take place between the two people, many others may still be carrying the offense around. Peripheral people being brought into the discussion process but not the correction process never allows them the ability to fully settle the matter. They are not sure how to view the offending party even after the matter has been settled.

What needs to happen is that the fewest number of people be brought into the process as possible. Matthew 18:15-20 progresses from just two people to three or maybe four, then the authorities in the church, and finally the church itself. We must not jump to involve people who will have to suffer through the correction process and sometimes be damaged by it, when they did not need to be involved from the outset.

#### **4. Operate Within the Respective Spheres of Authority**

The correction process is necessarily a process within the boundaries of authority. Matthew 18 deals within the sphere of the individual and then the church. This shows us that we first deal within the sphere of authority where the offense took place. If correction cannot happen in that sphere, we may need to appeal to another sphere of authority.

If a child is rebelling against his parents, the family is the appropriate sphere of authority for correction to take place. If an employee is stealing from a company, the company will probably take some corrective action by firing the employee but they may also need to take the matter to the civil authorities because the company does not have the right to criminally prosecute the individual –only the civil government can prosecute crimes.

It is important to deal with the offense first within the sphere of authority in which the violation occurred. If the matter can be settled within that sphere of authority, then it should go no farther. If it cannot be settled within that sphere of authority, it may then be appropriate to appeal to another sphere of authority.

There are some clear biblical admonitions about inappropriately crossing spheres of authority. For example, two believers are never to take their dispute to the civil authorities to settle the matter. The church is vested with the power to settle such matters, and both parties are to willingly submit to the authority of the church. However, there are some criminal matters in which the church does not have authority to execute civil punishment. Murder, rape, and theft are examples of the need to bring in civil authorities.

Divisions within the church should never be brought to the civil authorities because an invalid authority has now entered the process when civil government gets involved in church matters. The church loses its authority when it calls upon the civil government to settle matters that should be settled within the church. Generally, the church should deal with public sin that will affect the church. The same could be said when a husband and wife call in civil authorities to settle matters of discipline with their children. A biblically invalid authority enters into the home in this situation, to deal with a matter that the parents are mandated by Scripture to deal with. Once the invalid authority is there, it may not be willing to leave.

#### **5. Progress From Less Authoritative to More Authoritative**

The Matthew 18 pattern reveals the process of increasing levels of authority. The process begins with two individuals. There are no authority figures involved. Most matters can be settled without bringing in authoritative people. We should not be quick to call in someone in authority.

Even though the authority may be able to settle the matter more expeditiously, there is likely to be added offense for expanding the dispute beyond the interpersonal level.

As it becomes clear that the conflict cannot be resolved without the intervention of authority, then the appeal needs to go upward. Going upward means that the process gradually proceeds up the lines of authority until it can be settled or it reaches the highest level of authority. There should be no jump to the highest level of authority at the beginning stages. Neither should there be a skipping of authority levels. This brings offense to those in authority and is an open act of disrespect by those under their authority.

When Moses was burdened with judging all the matters for the nation of Israel, God brought relief through a revelation by Moses' father-in-law that he should appoint other judges. They carried the burden of judging the less difficult matters. If a conflict matter is brought to the highest level of authority all the time, that authority will be overburdened with the demand. The process should always go from the lowest level of authority to higher levels. This honors authoritative righteousness and also grants relief to those who have heavy burdens in higher positions of authority.

## **6. Only Involve People Who Can Do Something to Resolve the Conflict**

Matthew 18:15-20 shows us the characters involved in the process of conflict resolution. The offended party and the offender are at the first level. Next enter the witnesses. The biblical concept of a witness is someone who has first-hand knowledge of the occurrences. The next step is to involve those people who are in authority in the church and finally the people of the church.

If the matter could have been resolved with only two parties involved, that would be the ideal situation. When that cannot happen, there is need to involve other people. However, there are strict guidelines as to who is to be involved. Only those who can help to bring about resolution are to be brought into the process. To bring in other people that cannot help in the process will tend to tempt people to take sides without full knowledge of the situation. This often leads to gossip and slander within the fellowship of the saints and produces unrighteous division.

In many instances, the matter gets so out of hand when many people are involved who cannot bring about resolution that vain speculation, insinuation, and accusations begin to run wild. What began as a minor conflict becomes the devil's playground to disrupt and divide the church. If

someone comes to you and pleads their case against another you have now been brought into the loop of responsibility. You must either challenge the person to do what is right and deal directly with the parties involved, or, if the person refuses to do what is right, you must report the matter to those in authority so they can stop the cancer of gossip and slander from spreading.

There is a phenomenon that I call the “confidence trap.” This is when someone tells you something about another person in “confidence,” which means you are to tell no one else. What you are told casts a shadow on the character of another but now you are bound not to tell anyone, even though the person who told you may be telling others. The “confidence trap” subtly joins people into the sin of another. Do not let yourself be caught in this trap. Before you agree to listen to something being said in confidence, be certain that you are not agreeing to participate in divisiveness or rebellion against authority. If you do find yourself in the confidence trap do everything righteous you can to get out of it. Impress upon the person the need to deal with the matter righteously. Do not let it rest until it is settled in a biblical fashion.

## **7. Use the Least Force Necessary in Confrontation**

Sometimes conflict stirs up strong emotions. When these emotions energize the confrontation of the offending party, it may seem like a personal attack rather than a redemptive attempt at resolution. The temptation is to use threat of great penalties if the person does not repent and do what is right. The repentance may come but the process will cause a lasting wound that may not be easily healed.

What should be done is that the least amount of force or power is to be used and still get the job done. Matthew 18:15-20 shows us the standard of personal appeal between individuals. There is no immediate threat of telling the leaders of the church or broadcasting their sin publicly. Instead, an effort is made to use the least amount of persuasive force to bring about Godly reconciliation. Do not use a cannon when a small rifle will do the job.

If lesser force does not work, then greater force can be used. If the greatest force is used as the beginning point then there is nothing left to use to bring about the correction if the first effort is not successful. We move from gentle to stronger in bringing correction. The final stages of Matthew 18 show us that the greatest force used is the entire body of believers taking up the call for the correction process. This was only necessary if the person would not respond to several less forceful attempts to resolve the matter.

## **8. Observe Due Process**

Due process has several components to it, but it begins with not assuming guilt. The way a person is approached is very telling in regard to not assuming guilt. If accusations are the first thing we address then the person will be on the defensive and little will be accomplished. Any person in the correction process must believe they are going to be treated fairly or they will reject the process.

Also addressed in due process is the issue of whether the offense is based in truth or emotion. Just because we “feel” offended or hurt does not necessarily mean that someone has actually committed an offense against us. Trying to deal with an offense that is based in emotion and is acted on in emotion will usually produce greater offense. Heated emotions, anger, rage, and the like are the things that destroy the process of resolving a conflict. In order to process out an offense righteously, there must be an intentional emptying out of the emotion and passion. We need to be able to step back from the heat of the moment and get a little perspective. If a person is too emotional to deal with the truth, then they are not fit to process the conflict. The emotion must be addressed first.

Discovery of fact is the next step in due process. Discovery of fact is the process of finding out what happened. Each person’s view is slanted in their favor so it is always important to hear all sides of the conflict. If there are only two people involved, it is important to question the other person to see if what is believed to be the facts are confirmable from the other person’s point of view. When approaching someone who has appeared to have done something wrong we should always begin with questioning, not accusation.

Personal testimony is usually an important component of due process. In addition to the parties directly involved, there may be eyewitness testimony that can corroborate or refute what has already been said. If witnesses contradict one another, it may be a matter of perspective or it may be that one or more witnesses have a personal motivation to slant the truth. The Bible requires two eyewitnesses to convict someone of an offense. Second hand information, sometimes called hearsay, should not be taken as very weighty. There are occasions that people with personal dislikes for someone are happy to testify against the person they dislike based on what they have heard from others.

An accused also has the right to face the person making the accusation. There are to be no secret witnesses that can testify privately but not bring the truth out publicly. If someone is unwilling to say something in front of the accused, then it is not worth accepting as evidence. It is a serious matter for a person to be accused of a biblical offense. The accused should be treated fairly and with respect. Every person has the right to personally face

accusations and the accusers and be given an opportunity to refute what has been said.

Finally, we are not to judge motives but we are to discern motives. See (I Corinthians 4:5; 12:10; Philippians 1:9-10). If a person is motivated by anything outside of righteousness, their testimony is to be considered in a much less weighty way than one who seeks peace through Jesus. A wrong motive will color the process of testimony and discovery. Look for underlying reasons why someone would be saying the things they are saying. If there is impure motive, there is impure testimony.

## **9. Better to Be Wronged than To Trust the Unbeliever to Judge**

We should notice that Matthew 18 is within the context of the church in terms of settling the conflict. 1 Corinthians 6:7-8 states clearly that it is a disgrace when believers take their disputes outside of the context of the church. The wisdom God vests in His people should be sufficient to settle disputed matters. To run to someone who is not a believer to settle a dispute is to invite the ungodly to bring rule to the lives of the Godly. The ungodly are not qualified or capable of judging matters of Truth.

Any time a matter of conflict between believers is brought to the unbelieving world, it is a disgrace to the name of Jesus. It testifies to the unbeliever that the children of God cannot work things out amongst themselves. This tells the unbeliever that the truths of God's word are not sufficient for life and godliness. The church of Jesus Christ that is meant to be known for its love for one another takes their conflicts into the public sphere in contempt of Christ's authority and the delegated authority he has granted the church.

It is much better to be wronged and leave the matter in the hands of God to settle than to take the matter to the unbeliever. This is not so when talking about criminal violations of the civil law. Such violations demand the use of civil justice. Instead, it is when there are matters of conflict among believers that are meant to be addressed in the context of the church, family, or between individuals but are taken to civil authorities. Then Jesus' name is disgraced. God is the ultimate judge and the righter of wrongs. Better to appeal to him than to the unbeliever.

## **10. Use Appropriate Standards When Dealing With Different Types of Offenders**

There are three main categories of offenders: believers, false believers, and unbelievers. The standards of righteousness and the expectation of resolution is different for each category. We must make an attempt to

determine which type of offender we are dealing with in order to bring about proper resolution.

The believer is held to the highest standard. Believers should be expected to follow the commands of the Lord not only in practice but also in their hearts. Believers should be challenge to deal with not only the offense but also the reason behind the offense. Why did the believer violate a command of the Scripture? Clearly there is an issue of a wrong relationship with the Lord and that issue needs to be addressed.

God disciplines His children so anyone who is a follower of Christ should expect righteous discipline in their lives. Sometimes this discipline will come directly from the Lord while other times God will use other believers, unbelievers, or people in positions of authority to correct His children. It is important for us to learn to embrace these corrections and not become defensive when they are applied.

The highest goal for believers is unity. Unresolved conflict, and especially heart issues that are not dealt with, make the goal of unity impossible. Believers must be trained in understanding the need to lay down our personal hurts and frustrations with one another so that we can agree in Christ.

For the false believer, the standards of discipline are the same as for the believer. Even though these people are only falsely claiming to be believers, we still must treat them as believers because we do not have the right to judge their salvation. The goal of correction with false believers is to bring them to Christ, but if that goal cannot be achieved, the goal is to identify them and separate away from them. False believers may accept correction in practice but they will not accept correction in the heart issues that motivated the conflict.

Unbelievers are not held to the same standard as believers. We cannot expect the unbeliever to deal with deep heart issues that are wrong. We cannot expect the unbeliever to submit to the Truth of the Scriptures. What is to be sought with the unbeliever is first to bring them to Christ—in addition to that, we seek to be at peace with them. Peace with the unbeliever may not be possible, but we should strive for it. We must repent for our harmful actions even if the unbeliever refuses to do so. We must act righteously even if the unbeliever continues to act unrighteously.

We need to be certain to apply the correct standards to each type of offender. When rightly applied we can have unity with the believers, separation from the false believer, and peace with the unbeliever.

## **11. Repentance Must Be Complete and Without Condition**

When a person recognizes their wrong but then begins to blame it on circumstances or other people, they are not truly repenting. This often happens when someone states, "I'm sorry, please forgive me," and then proceeds to tell why things are really not what they seem to be. Some cultures make a habit of excuses. Never permit someone to mess up repentance with excuses.

True repentance always demands personal responsibility and the turning away from the wrong actions. To allow someone to verbalize repentance without taking responsibility for specifics is a mistake. If a person were to say, "I'm sorry for whatever I've done to offend you," he is most likely not really repenting. Repentance needs to be specific in order to show personal responsibility. "I am sorry for slandering you," and "I repent for rebelling against your authority," are a few examples of specific repentance. The more specific the repentance the more likely the offender is taking personal responsibility for their actions.

Repentance must also remedy collateral damage. If someone has expanded their sin by unrighteously communicating with people not directly involved, then the person repenting needs to go to each person he has violated through his words and repent to those people as well. This is very important in terms of carrying out righteousness, and it is also a deterrent from doing the same thing again.

Repentance should take place in the same venue in which the offense was carried out, if possible. If the offense was done in a public gathering, then private repentance does not satisfy the need for complete repentance. The person needs to go back into the same public venue and repent. If the same venue is not available, the offender then has the responsibility to carry out the repentance to extent that means allow.

Repentance cannot be based upon the concurrent repentance of another. If an offender says, "I will repent if he repents to me," he is trying to negotiate repentance. No such conditions should be allowed. Repentance comes because we rightly recognize we have offended God, and perhaps man, and we desire to be restored. What the other person does is not primarily our concern and can never be used as a condition for our repentance.

Repentance also requires carry through. This means that the offender is no longer participating in the action. In most cases, this requires some supervision for a period of time. If someone is a chronic offender, they will probably need a lengthy period of supervision to help them conquer their weakness in this area. Those in authority are the ones responsible to execute follow through when repentance has taken place. Sometimes follow through

is a formal action while other times it is just checking in with the person occasionally to see that they are still faithful to their repentance.

It should also be noted that when someone repents, the party that has been offended should forgive. The finality of repentance is felt by all when there is full and deep repentance and then forgiveness is granted by the offended party. We should seek to find this place of completion in all conflict resolution.

## **12. Forgiveness is Necessary for Release of the Offense**

In order to complete the process of conflict resolution, there must be forgiveness. Forgiveness is something that is granted by the offended party toward the offender. Jesus requires us to have a heart of forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-22). Forgiveness is not based upon the offender's worthiness to be forgiven, rather, it is based on the forgiveness of Christ toward us. Every person involved in resolving a dispute must have the heart of forgiveness that the Lord had toward us or else the process will turn into a demand for revenge. Anyone who enters into the resolution and reconciliation process without expecting to forgive will be very disappointed.

Forgiveness releases the offender from the offense. The burden is removed once the person has been forgiven. He can go on with his life free from the weight of having violated someone. He will not have to avoid the person if they encounter each other in church, at the grocery store, or at work. Forgiveness is a cleansing process that allows the offender to go on with his life.

The offended party is also released from the offense when forgiveness is granted. If the injured party refuses to forgive when the other party has repented, the offense becomes bound to him. He continues to carry around the wound of the offense and cannot be set free from the resentment he feels toward the offender. This resentment will pop up on occasion when he remembers the incident or when he sees the offending party. Forgiveness sets the injured party free to go on without carrying around the ongoing wound of the offense.

It should be noted that a heart of forgiveness is something we should have from the outset of the conflict resolution process, but the act of forgiveness follows repentance. It is important not to short circuit repentance by rushing in and offering forgiveness while the offending party is still experiencing the conviction of the Lord. Premature forgiveness may also be an insult to the offender who has not yet recognized his fault. To tell someone you forgive him when he does not feel that he needs to be forgiven is likely to make the person feel like you are accusing him of wrong when he is not convinced yet that he has done wrong. Forgiveness is the final step before restoration. At

that time, the forgiveness can be complete and so can the process of restoration.

In most cases of conflict all parties have something for which they should repent and something for which they should forgive. Even the offended party should take the opportunity of a conflict to look to his own actions to see if there is any fault in him. Even if the devil accuses us of wrongdoing, we should take the accusation seriously to see if there is any truth in it. It is a blessed thing when the offended party can forgive and repent of his unrighteousness and also ask for forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an act of love that allows healing and restoration. In working through conflicts we should look to the goal of complete repentance and complete forgiveness. This goal may not always be achieved, but those who do reach this goal will find that the process has caused them to grow closer to the Lord and become more like him. A good practice is to express the forgiveness verbally. An act of love that is not known is not received as an act of love. Let the person or people know that you forgive them.

## F. **Eight Types of Correction**

1. **Appeal** is the least aggressive type of correction. An appeal for correction can be brought to anyone and by anyone. Even if the conflict is purely a personality struggle, there can be an appeal made for correction. Appeals are requests for consideration of potential errors and possible suggestions for change. An appeal is usually the first step in the correction process. If someone rightly responds to a gentle appeal, there is no need for stronger measures of correction.

Appeals may be made to someone who is in authority over us, on a peer authority level, or to someone who is under our authority. Appeals should be the most common form of correction. If appeals are made more often, there is usually less need for stronger measures to be taken because correction will have happened before the matter becomes more serious.

2. **Confrontation** is the second level of correction. In a confrontation, someone is challenged with their offense. Biblical fault is shown and a clear challenge to correct is made. Paul confronted Peter when Peter began to fall into error with the those who were following the law instead of grace (Galatians 2:11;14).

Confrontation can be exercised with someone at the same authoritative level or with someone under a person's authority. There is no righteous pattern for those under authority to confront those in authority over them, that is

when an appeal is made. People under authority do not have the position to confront those in authority over them. That responsibility rests on those who are peers of the one in authority or are in authority over the person who is error. If an appeal to one in authority over us is not heeded then we can go to the next level of authority over them to make the appeal.

3. **Authoritative Correction** is the third type of corrective step. Authoritative correction requires that there be authority over someone in order to be carried out. Authoritative correction is when there is a requirement by the authority of the offender to remedy the offense. Authoritative correction means that the one in authority has some means to enforce the correction. Authoritative correction goes beyond the point of gentle persuasion. It is a righteous demand by someone put in a position to correct error. Many in the church today are offended to think that someone should have the ability to authoritatively correct them. The Scripture, however, is quite clear that those in authority in church not only have the right to bring correction but they also have the responsibility. If they do not take that responsibility they leave the church open for the “spirit of lawlessness” to bring division.
4. **Disfellowship** happens when the church body politic takes up the correction process. Disfellowship is when the people of the church are called upon, by those in authority, to put the offender outside of the fellowship of the saints. No longer can this person participate in church functions, be considered a member of the church, or be in right relationship with the authority of the church. 1 Corinthians 11:17-32 tells us that people in this situation who take the Lord’s Supper will become sick or die.

Disfellowship requires the full participation of those in authority as well as the participation of those under authority. When disfellowship occurs, the sin is necessarily made public. Disfellowship is intended to bring about a grief process in the offender so that he will want to repent of his sin and be restored to the fellowship he had once experienced.

5. **Disassociation** is the step after disfellowship. Disassociation is when the authority of the church instructs the entire church to not have anything to do with the offender. It also happens on a personal level when we encounter an idle brother (2 Thessalonians 3:6), a divisive brother (Titus 3:10), and unrepentant brother (1 Corinthians 5:11), and a false brother (Romans 16:17-18; 2 Timothy 3:5; 2 John vs.10). Someone with whom there is a disassociation should not be acknowledged in a friendly way in any venue. Whether in private, in the church, or in other public places, disassociation requires that we treat this wayward person with distance and non-association. This correction

is meant to be an embarrassment for the offender so that he will see the error of his ways and be restored to the way of righteousness.

6. **Turning the offender over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh** is a correction that requires the entire church to join in and request God's intervention by allowing Satan to have his way in the offender's life. The intent of this correction is that the person will become so miserable without the grace of God and with the torment of Satan, that he will consider his eternal condition and repent.

Turning a person over to Satan is a very serious step that opens a person up to terrible torment. This step should not be taken lightly. It is also important to understand that the unbelieving world will not understand this form of correction. They will see this as some esoteric measure that has little substance or meaning or else they will see it as an attempt to manipulate a person into yielding to the church authority.

7. **Appeal to other Spheres of Authority.** There are two powers that sometimes must be implemented in order to bring righteous correction. These powers are: 1. The power of the sword. 2. The power of the church. The power of the sword is necessary in criminal matters when there must be punishment, such as imprisonment, or the death penalty, that no other sphere of authority possesses except the civil government. In matters of sin and righteousness that cause public disgrace to the name of Jesus or his body, the power of the church may need to be called in order for correction to take its full course. In either of these cases, the transfer of correction from one sphere of authority to another should take place only where there is a clear and compelling reason to move outside of the sphere of authority in which the violation was committed.

8. **Turning the offender over to God for correction** is the eighth possibility for correction. God is the final authority and arbitrator in all matters. He puts people in positions of authority so human correction can take place without his intervention. In the case where human intervention fails, we always have the ability to turn the matter over to the hands of the Lord and leave it there.

## G. **When conflict is personality or preference based**

1. **Proverbs 17:14** says to "drop the matter before a dispute breaks out." We need to learn to walk away from situations that present temptations to jump into a personality conflict. If we can see that this is really a matter of preference and not of truth then we need to let people have some space and walk away.

2. **Proverbs 20:3** says, “It is to man’s honor to avoid strife.” We need to learn to do the honorable thing. This often means that we choose to rise above the fray of fruitless conflict and turn to matters of more significance. Getting involved in petty affairs to the neglect of weighty matters will consume much of our time and energy with nothing to show for it. Youth are especially subject to becoming entwined in trivial matters. Some adults fall into the same trap of majoring on the minors.
  
3. **Proverbs 26:17** says, “Like one who seizes a dog by the ears is a passer-by who meddles in a quarrel not his own.” Here we have the compelling admonition to mind our own business. Just because we see a conflict and think we can add something to it does not mean that we should. Do not be quick to rush into someone else’s conflict because you want to defend your friend or to uphold someone’s honor. Let the parties deal with the matter in a righteous and biblical way and stay out of it.
  
4. **Philippians 2:3; 8** tells us, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus...He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on the cross.” We must take the attitude of being humble in matters that are personality based or personal preferences. While we should never compromise the Truth of the Word, we need to be very humble in preference based matters and be willing to present ourselves to others in a humble way just as Christ did.
  
5. **2 Timothy 2:14** says, “Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.” We need to see God’s heart is for people not to be ruined just because we want our own way. If we find ourselves being willing to enter into conflict without considering the outcome for others, we have strayed from the path of love. Make way for people with other views and opinions. Do not insist on having your own way or having the last word in a matter.
  
6. **2 Timothy 2:24** “And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.” In kindness to others we must not allow ourselves to fall into resentment toward people. If someone rubs us the wrong way it is easy to carry around resentment. In order to stay right in our heart and away from unnecessary conflict, we must in kindness deal with those who are operating in some level of ignorance.
  
7. **James 1:19** says, “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...” Here we are challenged to learn to listen to other people. Even when they do not agree with us and when their personalities are not in accord with ours, we must try to come to the point of understanding. This also challenges us

not to be condescending toward others but let them say what they want to say without becoming angry.

## **H. Disengagement**

At times conflict can become very impassioned. When tempers flare and people begin to say things that intentionally hurt someone else it is time for disengagement. Disengagement is when we decide it is better to temporarily postpone the resolution process so that people can get themselves more under control. Sometimes there is a need to step back from the situation and consider another's point of view.

Disengagement is not the same as running away from the situation. Some people think if they run away from a conflict it will eventually work itself out. This is almost never true. People just carry around their unresolved conflicts and resentment toward others, allowing it to poison their hearts, minds and words. Disengagement is for the sake of gaining a right heart and a right perspective, not for the sake of avoidance. Disengagement from a biblical perspective always has the expectation of entering back into the resolution process until the conflict is settled.

It is important for people to recognize when disengagement is the best option. The Bible calls for us not to let the sun go down on our anger (Ephesians 4:26). This means we can put off the resolution process for a little while so we can get rid of our anger, but we should not put it off for a long period of time. Sometimes it only takes a few minutes to process out anger and resentment while other instances may call for hours. If it takes days and weeks to deal with our anger and hurt, it is taking more time than the Bible allows. Resolution should take place as quickly as possible with the least amount of damage to the parties involved.

Once the resolution process has resorted to character assassination or name-calling, we have passed the point of fruitfulness. It is important for us to recognize when we cross the lines and stop ourselves before we lose our temper and say things or do things we will regret later. Such actions and words are rarely redemptive and tend to nag in the back of the offended parties mind well after the conflict is resolved. If the other person is losing his temper, it is our responsibility to disengage and ask for another time when the process can resume.

Disengagement should never be used to cut someone off. Many times people will vent some of their hurts and frustration before the process of resolution begins to take affect. We should be willing to absorb some verbal assault ourselves in order to get to a good end. This may mean that we hear some things that are not necessarily true, at least from our perspective. We may want to jump in and tell the person he is wrong. Such moments can easily end up in a yelling match. Our role needs to be

one of taking the impact of the hurtful statements, realizing that they come from hurt more than truth, and look for ways for the process to move ahead. If there is no ability to move beyond the hurt then it may be time to disengage.

After disengagement occurs, we may need to look for a new approach to the resolution. This may mean talking about a different aspect of the conflict, it may mean bringing in some other parties to help bring resolution, or we may want to begin again with repentance for our part in the conflict. What is important is to take some time to pray and seek the Lord for a new attitude and a new view of the person with whom you are dealing. God has a way for the matter to be resolved. If we can get that Godly perspective on the matter the likelihood of success increases exponentially.

When dealing with a hot-tempered person, there may need to be a series of disengagements for resolution to happen. Hot-tempered people can usually only deal with a few things at time and then the anger begins to flare. Take them as far as you can go and then disengage so that the next time can be productive. Do not fall into the trap of returning anger for anger. This does not produce the righteousness of God. Better to disengage and return later than to push forward and to do harm that will not easily be undone.

## **I. When we are the offender**

Matthew 5:23-24 gives some insight regarding conflict. The instruction is “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.” Notice that at the altar and in the presence of God is when we are likely to become aware that we are not right with our brother. If we are the offending party in a matter and try to draw close to God, the first thing He will address with us is the offense we have created with another.

The instruction is quite strict in that the offending person is to leave the gift at the altar and go be reconciled. This shows us that God is more interested in right relationship than he is in the sacrifice we want to offer him. We cannot draw near to the Lord with offenses that we have committed. Those who continue on in these offenses simply harden their hearts against God and eventually do not even realize that they have lost their intimate relationship with him.

These verses are a challenge to all believers to take the first step in reconciliation, especially if we realize we have wrong in the matter. We should not be waiting for someone else to come to make the first move

toward resolving the matter. It is up to us to do what is right and make every effort to be reconciled to our brother.

Notice that once the reconciliation is completed, the believer has the opportunity to come back into the presence of God and offer his gift on the altar. God wants us to be able to draw near to Him but we must do it His way rather than ours. If we have caused unnecessary offense, the Lord will keep bringing it up to us until we deal with it. Only then can we go on in our walk with the Lord.

## J. **The Rebellion Movement**

Rebellion is rarely just an individual process. There is always the desire to gain followers and friends once a rebellion movement has begun. Satan gathered a portion of the angels to rebel with him. Absalom looked for others to join in his rebellion against his father, David. Rebellions against governments start out as valid complaints and usually end in armed conflict involving many people. The church is just as subject to rebellion movements as any governments.

A rebellion movement usually begins with one person or only a few people that have a conflict or a concern. The rebel will not deal with the concern righteously or may try to do so and be rebuffed. In either case, he becomes embittered and begins to talk to others about his “concerns” for the church. Soon, there are the “parking lot conversations” with the gathering of the “concerned.” The phone lines will usually light up with various forms of gossip and slander. There is justification because the leaders are not doing their job and many people are getting hurt.

Once the troops are rallied, the rebels now have a little army behind them. Numbers tend to embolden people so that the rebellion becomes less undercover. Soon there are leaks to those who have not joined the rebellion and the word begins to get out. This is often the time when the rebel leader will make the “power play.” Sometimes the power play is well defined with specific demands while in many cases it is more a seizing of position that will allow the rebel movement to have its say. Of course, the rebel movement cannot end here. Rebellion always leads to destruction. Once the “other group” is out of power, the rebels turn on each other until there is nothing left or until there is an ungodly leadership established.

Most believers will have many invitations through their Christian walk to join rebellion movements. Sometimes an innocent person will not know what he is getting into. Rebellion movements can happen at work and seem very justified because the boss is not treating people well. A rebellion movement takes on a life of its own, so once we join, we are swept along by the “crowd mentality.” This mentality is usually shifting

to make certain there is always a cause to fight against. Once there is no cause, there is no more reason for the rebellion and the real effects of the rebellion begin to become noticeable.

People that enter into rebellion movements may be able to survive one or two of these—but once you are in the movement, it is difficult to extract yourself. More often, the people in the rebellion movement begin to experience difficulties in their marriages, with their children, in the work place, or their finances. They may not make the connection that the troubles are due to the rebellion they have joined and the rebellion in their hearts, but the connection is real. After a few rebellion movements, it is unlikely that a person will be a faithful follower of Jesus any longer. Many will walk away from the faith and follow their own deceiving hearts to the end.

Rebellion movements violate several principles of conflict resolution. Believers should not be quick to take up someone else's offenses. We are wise to encourage people to act in a Godly way and direct them to deal with their issues directly with those who can effect a change. If we find ourselves already in a rebellion movement we should get out as quickly as possible. Getting out usually means losing friends and fellowship. It may also mean that we will need to stand in the face of some heavy criticism of having joined "them". Better to stand righteously before God alone than to find ourselves in league with the devil and have many companions. Break whatever ties are necessary and get out of the rebellion movement.

## **K. When the Response is not Righteous**

### **1. When to break fellowship:**

If the conflict resolution has not been taken through all the steps of authority dealing with the conflict and the matter being resolved, we may find ourselves in relationship with individuals and churches with whom we do not agree. Disagreement, even if it is long term and ongoing, is not necessarily a time to break fellowship. As a matter of observation, Christians are all too likely to break fellowship with a church or other believers for minor offenses. To break fellowship lightly is to not consider the weight of importance the Lord places on the Church Body and the unity of that Body. The matter must be weighed out very carefully.

First we will consider when to break fellowship with a church. This is not the same as moving away to a different location and finding a different church. It is also not the idea of God calling someone to a different body of believers or a different vision or purpose. The situation here is that the unresolved conflict has become so egregious that there is a compelling need to break relationship with this

particular body of believers. There are three biblical reasons for a person to break fellowship with a church:

- a. **There is a violation of the central doctrines of the faith.** People identify the central doctrines of the faith somewhat differently, but the essential elements are: 1. Salvation is by faith alone. 2. Salvation is in Christ alone. 3. The authoritative measure of the faith is the Bible. To violate any of these essentials in a church is just grounds to break fellowship. There should be a process of appeal to sound doctrine before the breaking of fellowship happens. Take the process as far as it can be taken before deciding to break fellowship.
- b. **The authority of the church refuses to act righteously in conflict.** We must be very careful with this one. Many people think they know what is the best course of action in a matter when they are really only seeing their narrow point of view. One of the roles of leaders is to bring about righteous correction and resolution. A leader or leadership team that consistently refuses to bring about righteous correction is in violation of the Scriptures. In determining if the leader or leadership has acted righteously, there must be a clear understanding of the biblical process and an identification of where and when the leadership violated the biblical process. The fact that the leadership did not handle a matter the way we wanted it to be handled is not sufficient to break fellowship; rather, the leadership must be identifiably violating their responsibility to act in a biblical fashion. This could be a matter of not being willing to correct or enter into conflict resolution or it could be a matter of showing favoritism. Again, care should be taken to not assume a leadership is acting unrighteously unless it can be proven by the Scriptural process of appeal, and the passing of time to allow matters to become more fully known.
- c. **People are being led astray.** In this instance, it is important to determine the fact that people are being led into falsehood. This may be intentional or unintentional. If it is unintentional then there is a responsibility to appeal to the leadership to correct the error of leading people astray. If there is no response or if the response is an unbiblical response without correcting the error, then to stay in fellowship in this church would be to participate in their sin of leading people astray. An example of leading people astray is a leader who must control people's lives. He insists on approving of all decisions made by people in their personal lives. This behavior would

violate the respective spheres of authority by allowing the authority of the church to override the authority of the individual or the family. Another example could be a church that spends its time and resources on matters that do not pertain to the gospel. There is no fruit in this case and people should not stay there.

## **2. When not to break fellowship:**

It is not appropriate to break fellowship because we do not like the leadership style of those in authority or because we do not like the sermons. It is not appropriate to break fellowship because of personal conflict with a leader or someone in the church. It is to the glory of Jesus when people can work out personal conflicts. It may be even more to the glory of Jesus when people can work together with each other effectively even when there may be some personal differences or variations in preferences. In this fallen world condition, it is unlikely that we will ever be so conflict free that this will not be an issue. Some people travel from church to church because they cannot get along with the leaders or, perhaps, some people in the church. Such people need to see themselves as the problem, not other people. They need to settle in somewhere and learn to serve and get along.

It is never appropriate to break fellowship with all churches everywhere. Some believers have taken the position that the “organized church” is so apostate that they cannot be involved in it. They refuse any authority in their lives and so will only acknowledge their relationship as “Jesus and me.” Such people are insulting Jesus by failing to recognize that He is the one who organized the church. While the church on earth is not perfected, it is still the instrument of Christ he uses to gather together his people and use them to reach the lost world.

## **3. When to break fellowship with other believers:**

Sometimes the conflict has little to do with the church or the leadership of the church. Instead, it is a matter of conflict between believers. In this case people have conflict with one another and are not able to resolve it. Before someone decides to break fellowship with another believer, he should be certain he has gone as far as he can in implementing the process of conflict resolution. If that process is exhausted, and it is a matter of not being able to reconcile, then the breaking of fellowship may be necessary. Here are some reasons why we would break fellowship with another believer:

- a. **The person has a contentious spirit and will not deal with it.** It is best to distance ourselves from such a person. There is no value in trying to have a close relationship with a person who has a contentious spirit. The likelihood is that those around a person with a contentious spirit will also find themselves in unnecessary conflict.
- b. **The person who refuses to work matters through to biblical resolution.** Many people want to avoid conflict so they just refuse to deal with it when it comes up. They are time bombs waiting to go off. If we find ourselves in their vicinity when they do go off, we get the fall-out effects. People who will not deal with conflict are never healthy. We should encourage them to learn to deal with conflict, but if they refuse, we should distance ourselves from them. In this case we may not fully break fellowship with them but our fellowship will be greatly limited.
- c. **People who are in rebellion against authority.** Those who are in rebellion against authority are a special danger and should be avoided. They often will speak freely about leaders in a negative way. Sometimes they use gossip and slander while on other occasions they may accuse or insinuate something that is wrong with those in authority. They do not deal with their concerns biblically and usually use the excuse that “they wouldn’t listen to me anyway” or “he is unapproachable”. We should call them to account for their sin but if they refuse to repent, we need to stay away from them.
- d. **Christians involved in willful sin.** Christians who choose to sin after they have put faith in Jesus are in a very dangerous spot. This is not to say that once we come to Christ we are no longer going to commit a sin. We all have some sin in our lives even after we come to Christ. As long as we are struggling against that sin, the Lord grants us grace to continue to be effective for him. Those who are in willful sin have stopped the struggle against sin. They are likely to justify their sin because they have embraced it. They will also be likely to lead others into their sin. We should not assume that we are so strong that we can resist their sin if we are close to them. Try to help them get out of their willful sin, but if they refuse, do not continue to fellowship with them. What fellowship has light with darkness? We may end up unwittingly supporting them in their sin and so being guilty ourselves. The separation with such people is not necessarily permanent. Sometime such

people see the error of their ways and can be restored to fellowship.

## **V. Conclusion**

- A. It is the high calling of the church and of individual believers to voluntarily join together with purpose and relationship in order to develop and God-ordained covenant community. This will be a difficult task for weak and sinful people, but it can be done in the power of Christ.
  
- B. If we will not do this, the church will experience continual strife and division. There will be little effectiveness in disciplining new believers into a healthy life in Christ. There will very little outward effectiveness in terms of reaching lost people for Christ because so many resources are consumed by internal needs.
  
- C. A covenant community can be developed and can become a life-giving place where the Lord is present in power and love. Such a community will be the joy of the saints and the envy of the lost.