

THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

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RECONCILIATION IN SCRIPTURE

There's a lot of conflict in the scriptures – and in the NT it is coupled with God's singular goal in Jesus Christ to reconcile us with God, and teach us how to live out that gospel of reconciliation with each other. In fact, reconciliation is the primary purpose of the church:

2 Corinthians 5:17-19

¹⁷ ... if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to Godself through Christ **and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:** ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to Godself in Christ, **not counting people's sins against them.** And God has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

In fact Paul made a point of urging the church to put that ministry of reconciliation into action when there was conflict between individuals.

Philippians 4:2-3

²I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names *are* in the Book of Life.

And Jesus had something very uncomfortable to say about the importance of dealing with conflict and working toward reconciliation:

Matthew 5:23-25

²³“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

What does this tell us? Even in church people have issues with each other! After all, we are human beings. What matters isn't whether there is or is not conflict, but how we deal with it.

Everything that we do is grounded in a theology of reconciliation. Here's how the Confession of 1967 talks about it:

9.21 The reconciling work of Jesus was the supreme crisis in the life of humankind. His cross and resurrection become personal crisis and present hope for humanity when the gospel is proclaimed and believed. In this experience the Spirit brings God's forgiveness to people, moves them to respond in faith, repentance, and obedience, and initiates the new life in Christ.

9.22 The new life takes shape in a community in which people know that God loves and accepts them in spite of what they are. They therefore accept themselves and love others, knowing that no one has any ground on which to stand, except God's grace.

Note the last part: God accepts us *in spite of what we are!* NO ONE has any ground on which to stand, except God's grace.

SO WHAT IS A HEALTHY WAY TO DEAL WITH CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH?

Matthew 18:15-17

¹⁵“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

This is a great model – it reflects maturity, and a healthy model for how to deal with conflict. However, it can also be used in unhealthy ways:

- To assume that the “other person” is the problem and you are completely innocent is arrogant.
- To bring someone along who sides with you is setting up an ambush and it will most likely mean that person you want to talk to will never trust you OR the person you brought along again. You may say “but I’m bringing along a neutral party!” Don’t assume you know who the other person will consider a neutral party. If you’re wrong, you’ve just made the situation worse.
- Tell it to the church: If someone starts complaining to others or trying to make something a big issue for the church without first trying to talk to the person or finding a mediator, then they end up making things worse and trust plummets all over the place, people start taking sides, and you’ve got the makings of a church split.

What does this look like in Presbyterian Church?

- First step is always to talk to the other person directly. Before things get out of hand. Once things get blown out of proportion it's a lot harder to work thru things and be reconciled.
- Talk to someone who isn't automatically going to go to bat for you – but who can help you think thru next steps. If that person automatically sides with you, they probably aren't a good choice. You want someone who can help you see things from a different perspective, and even help you see how you might have contributed to the situation.
- “Tell it to the church.” In the Presbyterian Church that means going to the Pastor, Personnel Committee, or Session for their help in resolving the conflict.
- If it still isn't resolved, the scripture tells us to “Treat them as a pagan or a tax collector.” How did Jesus treat pagans and tax collectors?
- If we all practiced that, we'd rarely see any conflict rise above level 2.

More people leave the church over conflict than just about anything else. Not because of conflict itself – every church has conflict – they leave because of how it is handled.

As leaders in the church, people will come to you with complaints and conflicts. In fact it is likely that you will hear them before the pastor or other staff. That's pretty typical in churches. How you deal with it is incredibly important for the health of the church.

First thing is don't deal with anonymous complaints. You can't be reconciled to an anonymous person. We are called to speak the truth in love, and it is not loving to hide behind anonymity. More likely than not, there's also background to whatever the issue is that you don't know, and anonymous complaints are often about something other than the complaint. If someone isn't willing to come forward, even if they need someone to stand with them, then there's really not much we can do.

Second thing, if you don't know what to do, ask for help. Talk to the pastor, talk to another session member, but don't just let things fester because you don't know what to do. If the issue is with the pastor or another staff person, talk to the individual first, and if it's not resolved, talk to Personnel and they'll help you work through it.

Third, sometimes things are bigger than we can handle, or high enough on the levels of conflict chart that we need an outside, skilled mediator. That's when we bring it to the session for next steps, because an outside mediator costs money – but it may end up costing us even more if we let big issues continue to grow.

Remember – it’s always best to deal with conflict when it’s at a low level, because the higher the level, the less willing people are to seek reconciliation.

If you want to know how important this is – one of the questions pastors often ask churches when they’re interviewing is “tell me about the last major conflict you had and how you dealt with it.” Because that tells us more than anything how healthy the church is. And if you say you don’t remember the last conflict, that’s an even bigger red flag. **So we want to catch disagreements early, before they reach the point of damaging a church.**

GOALS OF RECONCILIATION:

'... our "work" in conflict management cannot be the creating of reconciliation. That is God's work.

Our aim, rather, is to help one another to be faithful, to seek to create environments in which the possibilities of reconciliation are increased.

We are to invite others into new relationships and to invite ourselves into those new relationships - not to force them.”

Speed Leas, Moving Your Church Through Conflict