

Appendix 2: Scriptural Guidance

God's Better Way: Guidance from the Scriptures

Even a slight understanding of Christian teaching reveals that relationships are enormously important to God. The two great commandments are about relationships: the first, our love for God and the second our love for one another.

John 13:34-35 ***“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”***

Not only are we commanded to love one another but that love will be a sign to the world that we are followers of Jesus Christ.

Jesus repeated this emphasis. For example,

John 15:12 ***“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”***

Both of these passages say that we are to love in the same way that Jesus has loved us. That set a very high standard, but that, nevertheless, is God's command.

We could list many such passages. This message is emphasised and unmistakable.

The “one another” commands, so prevalent in the New Testament, are all about relationships and they all assume that relationships are sometimes difficult. There is no need to “be patient with one another” unless patience is being tested. The command to “forgive one another” assumes that wrong has been done and hurt has been caused. The Bible though will not allow us to wallow in that hurt. We are to take steps to restore the relationship to one that is healthy and positive.

The church is the context in which this is to be lived out. Relationships in the church are to model what Jesus asks of us and to be a witness to the world.

Criticism and negativity may be a fact of church life but it should not be. It is not God's way.

Titus 3:1-2 ***¹ Remind them... ² to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.***

The church environment should be positive and uplifting. It should be edifying i.e. a context in which people are built up, not torn down.

Ephesians 4:29 ***Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.***

The church environment should be safe. People should not live in fear of being hurt. The church should be the one place where they know that they will be loved always – even after they have failed in some way.

It would be hard to over-emphasise the importance of unity. One of the main themes of Jesus' final prayer, at the last Supper, was unity. This was on Jesus' mind even though, within a few hours, He would be suffering on the cross.

Other passages include:

Ephesians 4:3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (NIV)

Romans 12:18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Both of those passages state that we are to do all that is possible to maintain healthy relationships. That indicates (yet again) the emphasis that God puts on relationships. We can say we have been obedient only when we have done all we can.

Having said all of that, we also need to say that, sometimes, complaints are justified and need to be taken seriously. In our recent history world media has focused on the attempts of some churches to cover up serious crimes. The failure to properly acknowledge and address legitimate concerns is seen as being as culpable as the crimes themselves.

On the one hand, complaints may be mere selfish bad behaviour. On the other hand, people with genuine complaints need also to know that they are safe within a church context and that they will be heard and taken seriously.

What God thinks of Divisiveness

The spreading of negativity tends to divide. Groups of discontents can form. Factions may emerge on the two sides of an argument. Some people are alienated by what is being said about them. The reality of divided churches is all around us.

Yet God takes a very dim view of those who would divide His church.

As we have already noted, unity is a high priority for God. He loves His church and takes a dim view of any who would damage it. He loves the world and wants His church to be effective in mission spreading the gospel and making disciples. People who divide the church, destroy its effectiveness.

The seriousness with which God views divisiveness can be seen in the following scriptures.

Titus 3:9-11 ⁹ ***But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless.*** ¹⁰ ***Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them.*** ¹¹ ***You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned.***

Divisiveness is sufficient reason for expelling a person from the church. Those who are most critical of others or who want to see others punished may, themselves, be prime candidates for church discipline.

Most of us shy away from confrontation but we should not turn a blind eye to what God clearly sees as destructive. Such serious behaviours need to be confronted.

Biblical basis to Handling Disputes: The Matthew 18 Process

Jesus prescribed a process to be followed in the case of disputes.

The situation Jesus describes is where a brother or sister sins (or, as some manuscripts say, sins against you.) That is presumably the case, when someone is complaining or criticising. The complainant has presumably been aggrieved or hurt. That makes this passage directly applicable. This is the process the complainant should follow.

Conversely, if someone is the subject of vexatious criticism, that too is a case of a brother or sister sinning against him/her. And, again, the process applies.

With negativity being so prevalent, this is a process that we ought to understand and use.

Step 1

Step 1 is to go to the other person and express your concern.

It is always wise to do this in a spirit of humility, conscious that you might have misconstrued what happened. You might say, "It seemed to me that... Have I understood that correctly?" or "You said such-and-such. I've been unsure what you meant by that."

It may well be that the person acknowledges that something was done wrongly and apologises, or it might become apparent that there was a misunderstanding that can be sorted out. In those cases, the process finishes there and the relationship is restored.

Many people will avoid this step. Lacking the courage to confront the person, they instead talk behind his/her back.

That is not acceptable. If people are going to complain against others they need to be also willing to confront those people. To not do so is simply cowardice. That is why it is important that the church expects it. There is a proper process. If people are not willing to follow it, they must cease complaining.

Natural Justice

It is also grossly unfair if the person who is the subject of the complaint does not know what is being said about him/her or does not have the opportunity to respond to it.

"Natural justice" refers to principles of justice that are so obvious they should hardly need to be prescribed. There are two principles of natural justice. The first is "hear the other side" i.e. "no accused, or a person directly affected by a decision, shall be condemned unless given full chance to prepare and submit his or her case and rebuttal to the opposing party's arguments"^{1 2}

Step 2

If there is not resolution, the complainant is to confront the person again but this time with one or two other people who will corroborate the evidence. In other words, there are several people who genuinely feel that some sin has been committed.

¹<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/natural-justice.html#ixzz2KvPDxUaP>

² The second is that nobody should be a judge in his/her own case nor should influence the outcome of any case in which he/she is accused by any financial or other inducements.

Again, the person, faced with the additional weight of evidence may acknowledge and apologise. That should be the outcome we hope for so that the process need go no further. It should not be our desire to punish the offender but to seek reconciliation.

Further note

There may be exceptional situations where it is not advisable for the offended person to confront the offender alone or even with the support of others e.g. where that would put the person in more danger or where the situation is so difficult it would cause considerable trauma or the person could not conduct him/herself well.

They should be only exceptional cases. We need to be a little careful about deviating from what Jesus has taught but there may be times when professional, or mature Christian, advice should be sought before proceeding.

Step 3

Step 3, as described by Jesus, and assuming there has still been no resolution, is to “tell it to the church”.

That does not mean that we should stand up during worship and accuse someone! Telling it to the church can be accomplished by submitting it to the church leadership.

Sometimes this is the *first* step people will take. They might complain to the pastor about another church member, expecting him/her to action it. The pastor should immediately, of course, ask if steps one and two have been followed. The complainant has certain responsibilities in this.

Telling it to the church still does not assume that the complaint has substance. It is submitting it to the leadership for their determination. It could still go either way.

Most churches will have formal complaints procedures that describe how a complaint will be handled. This is the point at which that process is engaged.

The process is now out of the hands of the complainant and in the hands of the church leadership.

Step 4

If the church determines that the accused is guilty and there is still no repentance, the person is to be treated as a pagan or a tax collector.

That does not mean that he/she is shunned and no one talks to him/her. That is not how the church should treat pagans or tax collectors. There should still be love and a concern for the person salvation and restoration. (See, for example, 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15)

It does mean, however, that the person is not considered to be a believer or church member.

Changing the Culture

Where negativity has become part of the culture of a church, what can we do about it?

Acknowledge it and name it

Being careful to double check your discernment of the situation, if there is a culture of criticism within the church, start naming it. Too many evils are allowed to continue and grow simply because no one will be honest about them.

Part of naming it is making it clear that this is not acceptable. This is not consistent with what God expects of us.

Care might be taken to ensure that no individual is identified as the problem.

Having said that, it may be that an incident requires a more public response as an example to the church.

There are obvious perils in this. Be ultra-careful of your facts and your process and, most importantly, your motivation. But sometimes it needs to be done.

Teach on it

The word of God is useful for teaching, correcting, rebuking and training in righteousness. Teach what God has to say about the topic.

Some people will be willing to submit and to order their lives according to God's truth. Others may not but, at least, they will now be aware of the standards God requires.

Teaching is not simply a case of pointing out how bad something is. "Training in righteousness" means providing biblical means of victory over sin and living God-honouring lives. Help people who want to do better, to do better.

Break spiritual bondages

We cannot manage our way out of spiritual problems. If there is some sort of spirit of criticism in the life of a church it will be defeated only by spiritual means. This might involve prayer, fasting, deliverance, exorcism, the proclamation of truth, the taking of God-given authority.

In a church with little experience in these areas, it may mean consulting people who are respected and who do have more experience and expertise.

Anything that opposes the influence of Satan is spiritual warfare. A determination to maintain strong relationships following biblical principles is spiritual warfare.

Model the opposite

Obviously leaders should model what they desire to see in the lives of others. (Although,, it is not so obvious that we automatically do it. Leaders need to hold each other accountable for modelling godliness in all areas.)

It is not, however, the responsibility of the leaders only. All more mature Christians have a responsibility to live godly lives as an example to those who are younger. A church is charged with making disciples who “obey everything that Jesus commanded” (Mt 28:20). It is the church’s task to grow its members to maturity.

Throughout a church, there should be many examples of strong relationships and people who are willing to do the right thing when someone has done the wrong thing i.e. are willing to live out the one another commands.

Challenge it

Sometimes bad behaviour should be over-looked, however, we tend to do that all of the time.

More often, bad behaviour should be challenged. That may mean approaching the person privately and gently bringing to his/her attention what happened, perhaps what should have happened and what might be a better option next time the situation arises.

Occasionally, it is appropriate to immediately challenge the behaviour pointing out that that is not how we do things around here.

Require Christians To Adhere To The Matthew 18

Process

Jesus’ teaching is not to be simply ignored. People in disputes have responsibilities, including the responsibility to act in an obedient and godly way. Require them to do it. Being expected to front up to people, for example, will immediately reduce the number of frivolous criticisms.

Never reward bad behaviour

Much of the pettiness in churches is simply bad behaviour that reflects spiritual immaturity.

Almost all bad behaviour is essential selfish – people want what they want. They want the worship style and everything else to suit them. “It is all about me.” And yet, Jesus calls us to die to ourselves. In fact, He said that unless we deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Him we cannot be his disciples.

Bad behaviour might be inevitable in those who are not disciples of Jesus (although sometimes even they behave better than some church members) and may have to be accepted from new Christians (although even there, it might provide a “teaching moment” and an opportunity for further growth) but it should never be accepted from those who should know better.

We reward bad behaviour when we do what the person wants. If a person complains so as to have power, and we keep listening and modifying things so as to keep them happy, we reward their bad behaviour.

If a person complains so as to hurt someone else and we convey a vexatious criticism to that other person and cause unnecessary pain, we have rewarded the bad behaviour.

Disciple-making involves helping people grow to maturity. If we continue to accept immaturity, we fail that person. Being faithful to our mission will mean helping (by whatever means is appropriate) that person to move beyond their current level of immaturity and their current behaviour. We need to be alert to what is, essentially, bad behaviour, and willing to help people grow.

When You have a Complaint

Maybe you should do nothing

Do you even want to pursue it?

Why? What is your motivation for lodging a complaint against a brother or sister? Take a piece of paper and write down your answers to that question. Be honest with yourself.

Might it be better to simply ignore it, forgive, understand where the person might be coming from and move on.

Use the following as a guide:

“So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.”

Colossians 3:12-15 NASB1995

Maybe you should do something

Most of us prefer to avoid conflict and might easily choose the option of doing nothing. There may be good reasons for that but it might also be the wrong option.

If a relationship has been damaged, God almost certainly wants you to sort it out. God values reconciliation. Matthew 18 still applies. If someone has sinned against you, go and talk to him/her.

Follow the Matthew 18 process.

Desire to do what is right at every juncture. Even though you feel you have suffered an injustice, ensure that your behaviour remains consistently godly. Do not sink to the level of those who have treated you badly. It is more important that you can stand before God knowing that you acted well at all times. God is a God of justice and he is the ultimate judge.

Studiously avoid strategies that are not acceptable

- Talking behind people's backs
- Spreading discontent
- Rallying support
- Speaking negatively of others – even those who have hurt you

You need to trust the process and trust the leadership of your church.

If you do not believe that you have been treated fairly. It is still important to follow proper process. Most churches will have some form of appeal e.g. to a higher authority.

When You Are Criticised Or The Subject Of A Complaint

1. Remain silent

Don't defend yourself

2. Do not retaliate

Leave justice to God. It is mine to revenge...

Don't sink to the same level

3. Continue to bless

Do good

Rom 12

Pray

4. Learn From It

Rick Warren says, "Criticism is your best friend."

