

Introduction

- A. In our lesson last Sunday we discussed some of the reasons churches decline.
 - 1. The last item on our list was the decision to fight and divide. In too many churches petty fusses over minor offenses or issues of judgment explode into major controversies. These controversies derail the work of God and divide His people (**Galatians 5:15**).
 - 2. Our point last Sunday is that we need to learn something from this mistake other churches make. We need to recognize the danger and work really hard at getting along (**Ephesians 4:1-3**).
- B. But it was this last point that prompted a followup question to the sermon last week and a request for some additional teaching.
 - 1. One person suggested that we talk in more detail about how Christians are to work through problem and issues with each other. In fact, we were asked to deal with this in a very practical way. We always try to honor requests for teaching on a specific subject. But because of the potential impact – not just on the souls involved, but on the very future of our congregation – it seemed especially important that we add these additional thoughts to the lesson from last Sunday.
 - 2. We want to make some very practical suggestions on how we address problems and issues with other Christians.
 - 3. Let me begin by making four quick observations about the Bible teaching we will examine. First, what the Bible says about handling problems with others is not what most people do. Second, it's not even what happens in most churches. Third, it's not the easiest thing to do, a least at first. In fact, it may be very difficult. Fourth, it is God's way – which means it will always turn out to be the best thing.
 - 4. So what are some practical, specific things we can do to help us work out problems with other Christians.

Step [1] Accept Reality

- A. I fear that some have unrealistic expectations of what is supposed to happen in a church.
 - 1. They believe that, since we are all Christians and focused on getting to heaven, then we should always get along. It's like newlyweds who believes that, since they love each other, they will never have conflict. It doesn't work that way in marriage or in local churches.
 - 2. Let's face reality. We all come from different backgrounds and life experiences sometimes struggle to see things the same way. Add to this that, even though we are all striving to be like Jesus, we are at different points in that maturing process. Finally, sometimes, no matter how mature we are, we just blow it. We do the wrong thing and we hurt our brothers and sisters.
 - 3. We see these same problems among the early disciples. Certainly no one would question Peter's spiritual maturity. But on a visit to Antioch he blew it. He allowed some of his Jewish brethren to intimidate him and he pulled back from his Gentile brothers and Paul had to call him out on it (Galatians 2:11-14). We saw another example in our Bible reading last week. Paul and Barnabas (two faithful workers) had a strong difference in judgment about taking John Mark on their second journey (**Acts 15:36-40**).
- B. Let me make two observations about this story.
 - 1. First, neither Paul nor Barnabas left the Lord because of this problem. Struggles like these are part of life in our spiritual family.
 - 2. Second, notice that Paul and Barnabas found a way to work out their problem in a way that allowed the work of God to move forward. They never did agree about taking John Mark; but they found a way to keep working. We must find ways to work out our problems so that the work of God can continue unimpeded.

Step [2] Appraise The Problem

- A. To appraise something means that we are going to determine its value.
 - 1. If you are going to sell your house, the bank will insist that you have an appraisal to determine how much it is worth.
 - 2. We need to do the same thing with issues that arise among us. Before we start to address them, we need to first appraise them. What is the value of this issue; how important is it?
 - 3. When I first began preaching, an older preacher gave me some advice that has really served me well. He warned me to **choose my battles** well because – not everything is worth going to war over. Some issues just aren't that important (**Proverbs 3:30**).
 - 4. If there is no real fault or injury involved, if the issue is really no big deal, just let it go.
- B. Let me suggest a couple of things that will help us avoid going to war over petty things.
 - 1. First, pause for 24 hours. It is amazing how a good night's sleep can shed new light on a problem. I will confess that, when I do this, most of the time I decide that my issues just needs to be dropped.
 - 2. Second, while we are taking the time to think things over, we need to assume the best in others. If there is a positive way to interpret the words and actions of others, choose to do that. This is what love requires (**1 Corinthians 13:7**). Most of the time our conflicts are more about misunderstandings than malicious conduct. So take the time to appraise the problem.
 - 3. If you wind up with an issue that needs to be addressed, then...

Step [3] Go To The Source

- A. Most people do not do this.
 - 1. It's hard to sit down – face to face with someone you disagree with or are upset with – and work through the problem.
 - 2. It's a whole lot easier to complain to a friend who will take your side.

3. This approach doesn't solve anything. After I've "vented," the problem remains. Things may even be worse because I've poisoned someone else's attitude. This fills a congregation with hostility and bitterness – things that help discourage our work and lead to decline.
- B. Here's the bottom line: Jesus addressed this issue (**Matthew 18:15**).
1. When I have a problem with a brother, my first step is to go to him and work it out just between us.
 2. This isn't easy, but it is best. More important, it's what Jesus requires.

Step [4] Know The Objective

- A. When I go to my brother, I need to be sure that I know why I'm going – that I know my objective.
1. Sometimes our efforts to take on a problem are doomed to fail because we go in with the wrong objective. For example:
 - a. "This guy really hurt my feelings and I'm going to get him told."
 - b. "This guy is wrong and I'm going to prove it."
 - c. "I need to be heard on this and they're going to listen to me."
 2. If this is my attitude, then I'm going into this discussion with some dangerous assumptions: I'm right; that I have perfect knowledge of this situation and my behavior has been above reproach. This is rarely the case. There is usually fault on both sides.
 3. When I am closed to even the possibility that I might be wrong or I might need additional information, then our conversation is doomed to fail.
- B. What we need is a new objective.
1. Rather than digging in our heels and insisting on BEING right, we need to go in to these important discussions focused on DOING what is right. I'm not in this to win an argument or get my way. I want God to get His way; I want His cause to win!
 2. If this is going to happen, I have to do some things. I need to do less talking and more listening. I need to be sure I understand the other people involved (**Proverbs 10:19**). I need to be open – open to the possibility that I'm wrong, open to new information that might change my mind. I need to be humble – willing to admit when I'm wrong and apologize (**Ephesians 4:2**), willing to consider someone else's ideas.
 3. I need to go into these crucial conversations with a clear sense of my objective. It's not about being right, it's about doing right!

Step [5] Be Sure To Behave

- A. The Bible has a lot to say about how we conduct ourselves at difficult moments when opinions differ and passions run strong. For example:
1. **Proverbs 15:1**. Calm voices and gentle words help quiet a volatile situation. This is how I need to speak.
 2. **II Timothy 2:23-25**. Paul told Timothy to be kind and gentle when dealing with his opponents.
 3. **Proverbs 15:18**. I need to keep my cool and resist the temptation to be provoked into an angry response.
 4. **I Corinthians 16:14**. Every word, every action should be for the good of the other guy. I must never allow myself to seek his harm.
- B. None of this is rocket-science; for most it is not new information.
1. In the middle of a conflict, we know when we are departing from the path God has given us. How's that working out for you?
 2. The challenge is to discipline ourselves for obedience (**Proverbs 16:32**). I must do what God expects, no matter what the situation.

Step [6] Move On

- A. Conflicts have a way of hanging on – even after efforts have been made to resolve them.
1. Some of us struggle with letting go of anger and forgiving, even when forgiveness is sought.
 2. On other occasions we may continue to be angry because we didn't get our way or things did not work out the way we wanted.
 3. Other times it may be even more complicated. Sometimes an apology seems forced or hostility still seems to be present. It leaves us wondering if things have truly been resolved.
- B. At times like these we must learn how to move on. This means different things, depending on the situation.
1. If I'm just hanging on to my anger, this is sinful (**Ephesians 4:26-27**). I need to forgive and move on (**Colossians 3:12-14**).
 2. If I'm continuing to stew because I did not get my way, I need to learn to check my pride and move on. Paul told us humility is essential for unity (**Ephesians 4:2**). I can't always have my way. I need to accept that, move on and (like Paul and Barnabas) continue doing my thing to move the cause forward.
 3. But what if the problem is not with me? What if it's the other person who continues to be angry and hostile toward me? Then I have to move on without them. Paul makes clear that it will not always be possible to be at peace with others (**Romans 12:17-18**). But he does go on to tell us what we should do (**Romans 12:19-21**). I cannot force someone to be at peace with me, but through my ongoing acts of love and kindness I can make it really difficult for them to continue being mad.

Conclusion: This is not easy...

But this is what we must do. We do it because God requires it of us. We do it because it enables us to continue working together in peace. We do it because it enhances our ability to reach lost souls with the gospel. And there is no more important work than this...helping men and women get right with their God. Is your life right with God?

- David A. Banning